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UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONIST IMPLICATIONS FOR FAMILY THERAPY

BY

DAVID PARE´

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A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degreee of MASTERS OF EDUCATION in COUNSELLING PSYCHOLOGY.

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY

Edmonton, Alberta

Fall, 1994

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DEGREE: Masters of Education, Counselling Psychology

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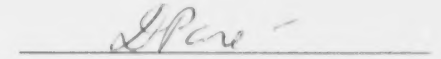

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"The aim of interpretation, it could be said, is not just another interpretation but human freedom, which finds its light, identity, and dignity in those few brief moments when one's lived burdens can be shown to have their source in too limited a view of things".

David Smith

I believe that imagination is stronger than knowledge--
That myth is more potent that history.
I believe that dreams ar more powerful than facts--
That hope always triumphs over experience--
That laughter is the only cure for grief.
And I believe that love is stronger than death.

The Storyteller's's Creed

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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONIST IMPLICATIONS FOR FAMILY THERAPY

submitted by David Paré

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

of Master of Education

in Counselling Psychology

Dr. D. Donald Sawatzky (supervisor): .....

Dr. Ronna Jevne: .....

Dr. Julia Ellis (External): .....

Dr. Alan Parry (External): .....

Date: Sept 6, 1994

DEDICATION

To Anne and Peter Paré, who provided the nurturing and inspiration to germinate this story; and to Susan Peet and Casey and Liam Peet-Paré, whose love and support helped it to blossom.

Abstract

The three essays which comprise this thesis examine the implications of social constructionist thinking for the practice of family therapy. Social constructionism is defined as an epistemologicial perspective which views meaning as intersubjective, emerging from communities of persons. These communal understandings may be viewed as the consenual realities we inhabit--"realities" which reflect both our cultural commonalities and our cross-cultural differences. From this perspective, families may be viewed as cultures which give rise to their own unique meanings. The practice of family therapy shifts from a technically-oriented approach to correcting non-normative behavior patterns, to a more open-ended search for these meanings, as well as a quest for harmonious relations among family members, and between families and other cultures. The first essay of this thesis proposes that the traditional family therapy metaphor of the family as a "system" is out of step with the social constructionist thinking which underlies much of contemporary thought. The deficiencies of the system metaphor are explored. It is proposed that the metaphor of the family as a culture would prove more fertile for accomodating a range of current issues and concerns--including power, hierarchy, gender, socio-historic context, and cross-cultural considerations. The second essay examines further the implications raised in the first. It outlines a number of entailments of the family culture metaphor, including the notion that the task of family therapy might be viewed as the facilitation of cultural harmony. The third essay provides an overview of three emerging approaches to family therapy informed by social constructionist thinking.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to Don Sawatzky, Ronna Jevne, and Alan Parry for their enthusiastic support for this work, and for their stimulating responses to earlier drafts of the essays. Thank you, as well, to Julia Ellis, who entered the story much later, and pointed the way to stories yet to be told.

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INTRODUCTION

Like all stories, the narrative which unfolds in the following pages is rooted in a community of persons. The three essays which comprise this thesis contain reference lists liberally sprinkled with the names of people I have "met" in recent years--most of them contemporaries, most of them psychologists, most of them located in North America, Australia and New Zealand, connected over distance through a web of printed words. I hope it will not be difficult to see how my story borrows from their stories, and how, like any good yarn, it attempts to lead its audience from the known into the unknown.

But stories do not only connect us to others across space; they also link us through time. What is far less evident in the story I have chosen to tell is the taproot which runs deep into the soil of my own beginnings. The reference lists reflect my choice of professional companions, but the origins of my current affiliations are rooted in the cultures of my childhood, and are mostly hidden between the lines.

My mother came from a family of seven children; my father from a family of nine. Catholics all, most of these siblings multiplied bountifully. However none outdid my own parents, who had nine children. And so I grew up in a large family, amid a large family of families--a rich culture of blood relatives. My childhood was peopled by siblings and cousins, uncles and aunts, nieces and nephews, whose faces and body shapes curiously mimicked each other across the generations. For me, it is natural to consider my own story in the context of the numerous stories which surrounded me.

In some respects, the story I tell here reprises familiar and comfortable family themes. A therapeutic approach which favours "story" as a resonant framework, and which emphasizes the creative potential of individuals and cultures, echoes of my mother's family. Prodigious readers, lovers of art, music, and literature, the Allisons are drawn to the aesthetic dimension of life, and so am I. The notion of applying myself to the rigorous study of a discipline oriented to the service of others seems more reflective of my father's influence. A physician who specializes in pulmonary medicine, my father has always communicated that a life is wasted which is not dedicated to improving our collective well being. How I have come to interpret these themes in their stories, and how I have come to privilege them in my own work are fascinating questions not addressed in the essays to follow. But what I hope the essays do succeed in communicating is my deep commitment to the notion that each of us deserves--indeed, has a fundamental right--to fashion our *own* stories from the rich material of the cultures from which we spring.

My own extended family culture was an anglophone subculture of predominantly francophone Quebec. Sunday mornings in the summer saw a convoy of Paré vehicles converge on the parish church in the small village near our lakeside cottage. Pew upon pew of Parés: we were taller on average than most, but it wasn't only height that distinguished us from the general congregation. In the Fifties and early Sixties, Quebec's so-called "Quiet Revolution" was barely underway, and the English/French duality was as much about class as it was about language. The Parés and other cottage owners were mostly middle and upper middle class anglophones, residents of Westmount, Town of Mount Royal, and other prosperous bedroom communities of Montreal. The locals were largely working class francophones, rural Quebecers--

shopkeepers, mechanics, tradespersons. Sunday morning under the church spire in the village of Val Morin was a cross-cultural affair.

And so the concept of culture--like that of family--figured prominently in my upbringing. But beyond those influences lurks something which I perceive as even more fundamentally formative to the narrative which unfolds here. That is my emphasis on the voice or story of each person. As one child of nine, in one family of more than a dozen families, in one of two predominant cultures, I felt both the richness of community and the capacity of the crowd to mute the voice of the individual. For me, the experience of "growing up" has been largely about sifting through the limitless stories which have always surrounded me, discarding some, embracing cherished others, fashioning my own story as I make a life for myself. The story here does not represent all of who I am; nor does it purport to speak my final word on these topics for ever more. I suppose the process of choosing what is mine and voicing it will never end. But it is a vital and freeing process; writing these essays has been a joyful experience of self-expression. I hope that in some way they enrich your own story.

-o0o-

It is natural for me to think of language and meaning as emerging from communities of persons, rather than somehow existing of and for themselves. To me, the notion is self-evident, almost organic in its grounded simplicity. And yet this perspective which I seem to share with an increasingly large number of theorists and practitioners in psychology raises implications for psychotherapy which do not necessarily concur with mainstream practice.

The three essays which comprise this thesis represent forays into what is for now relatively unexplored territory. For the most part, discussion is centred around theoretical work in the field of family therapy. But each of the essays

devotes a good deal of attention to the fundamental premises underlying work with families, and in that sense they are preoccupied with questions which extend far beyond the borders of family therapy, or even psychotherapy as a discipline unto itself.

The essays are informed by a dramatic shift in perspective which has taken hold of the humanities. A cross-fertilization has become rampant among fields such as anthropology, linguistics, literary criticism, sociology, and feminist studies. This postmodern explosion of interdisciplinary discourse is energized by no less than a re-construal of the world about us. To use a term which appears with increasing frequency in the literature from which these essays are drawn, a multi-modal "re-visioning" is underway. The implications for psychotherapy are nothing short of stunning.

The re-visions have been a long time in the making. At the risk of oversimplifying a nuance-filled transformation in thought, they may be construed as a reaction to the Enlightenment ideal of objective reason (Smith, 1991)--an ideal which can be traced unerringly to the foundationalist thinking of Plato (Rorty, 1982). Western thought since Plato has been dominated by a dualistic view which separates the sphere of everyday life from a heavenly sphere--a place of absolute truth and beauty uncontaminated by baser human concerns.

For Plato, truth and beauty could be experienced only by emerging from the metaphorical cave in which we all dwell, mistakenly taking the flickering shadows of forms to be their essences (Greene, 1994). It is a picture of ordinary humans cast from the garden of Eden, severed from the experience of God's creation--a picture increasingly discordant with the rising voices of secularism and post-Enlightenment thinking. By the latter part of the 19th century, a number of

writers, mostly in continental Europe, began to question the validity of an exalted truth which transcends experience.

Nietzsche, Dilthey, Husserl, and Heidegger among many others brought to light an astounding new epistemology which privileged neither abstract rationality and logic, nor rigorous empirical methodology. Instead, attention turned to interpretation and human experience, and the capacity of all of us to come to understanding through our daily interactions with the world. Implicit in this change of view is a movement from the notion of knowledge as the exclusive possession of those with high intellect and learning, to the idea that knowledge is more akin to Being, and available to all of us. The democratic thread in this perspective is strongly evident in the psychotherapeutic approaches discussed in the essays to follow.

By the 1920's, the brave new science of particle physics affirmed the emerging emphasis on subjectivity, on the linkage between knowledge and vantage point. Heisenberg concluded that subject and object are inextricably linked, that "in effect, there is no basic unit of matter to be observed independent of those who make the observation" (Gergen, 1991, p. 89). According to this decidedly un-Platonic view, we do not perceive the underlying reality by using reason or empirical rigor to pierce the skin of our subjectivity. Instead, "what counts as facts depends on one's perspective" (Gergen, 1991. p. 91).

While we may forever debate what is "out there", we all have some degree of access to our own experience. Increasingly, that experience is construed as dynamic and ever changing. From a Newtonian conception of a rigid and predictable universe which lies beyond our senses and is governed by unwavering laws of mathematics, we have moved to a post-Einsteinian view which construes the world as changeable and unpredictable--a place which cannot be experienced

in any degree whatsoever without reference to ourselves as perceiving subjects. The focus therefore shifts from world-as-thing to world-as-process, and the process inescapably involves our own humanity.

As a consequence of this change in view, the world we inhabit is seen not so much as a reality we inherit, but rather one which we *construct* in the very act of perceiving it From this perspective, "problems", "disorders", "dysfunctions", and "pathologies"--to name a few of the phenomena which the field of psychotherapy has traditionally taken upon itself to identify, label, and hopefully "cure"--are not discovered, but invented. They are categories of experience generated by groups of people in historo-cultural contexts, and as such are inevitably reflections of values, and of the dynamics of social hierarchy which lead to some values being granted precedence over others.

These ideas are expounded at length throughout the essays collected in this volume. All turn a postmodern eye on the field of family therapy, and depict what I see as a significant re-thinking of the task of family therapy, and of psychotherapy in general.

The first essay, *Of Families and other Cultures : The Shifting Paradigm of Family Therapy* , examines the metaphor of the family as a system which is central to most mainstream approaches to family therapy. It is argued that although systemic thinking represented an innovative departure from established individual approaches, it carried with it a strong vestige of modernist assumptions which are out of step with postmodern thinking. In the essay I argue that family therapy is undergoing a paradigm shift common to the humanities and founded on epistemology. I propose that a metaphor of the family as a culture--though no more "correct" in empirical terms--is more congruent with the emerging

paradigm, and provides a more resonant perspective from which to view families and family therapy in a contemporary context.

The second essay, *A Cultural Perspective of Families and Family Therapy*, is an extension of the first. It suggests that all metaphors suggest or entail other metaphors, and goes on to examine some of the practical entailments which follow from privileging a cultural metaphor in family therapy. A central concept which emerges is that the task of family therapy may be more appropriately viewed as a project of achieving cultural harmony rather than righting family dysfunction.

The third essay, *The New Social Constructionist Approaches to Family Therapy*, provides an overview of three emerging clinical orientations which are largely informed by social constructionist thinking. Although the approaches differ in a number of significant ways, they are united in their emphasis on the potential of individuals and families to create their own realities, to author their own stories, to fashion their own lives.

These essays are primarily influenced by feminist thought, and the ideas of White and Epston . They discuss some of the many possible practical implications of these perspectives for psychotherapy; but the essays are largely theoretical. They are concerned with laying the groundwork for more clinically-oriented explorations. At a time when most of our long-standing and fundamental assumptions about the world are being turned on their heads, those further explorations are certainly called for. I hope that the writings assembled here may stimulate some of that further research.

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Of Families and Other Cultures:

The Shifting Paradigm of Family Therapy

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University of Alberta

Abstract

This article proposes that family therapy is currently undergoing a paradigm shift as a result of the ascendance of an epistemological focus absent in the foundational works which gave rise to the field's dominant clinical approaches. While systemic metaphors for the family are based on mechanistic, biological and linguistic models primarily concerned with how the world *is* (ie. ontology), postmodernism's social constructionist leanings give primacy to meaning, interpretation, and the intersubjectivity of knowledge (ie. epistemology). Thus the metaphor of the family as a system is gradually being subsumed by a metaphor which construes families as interpretive communities, or storying cultures. It is suggested that this largely implicit transformation be made explicit in order to more fully explore the clinical implications of the new epistemology.

We shall not cease from exploration
and the end of all our exploring
will be to arrive where we started
and know the place for the first time

T. S. Elliot

The field of family therapy is up to something big. For more than a quarter century, family therapists have challenged individualistic approaches to psychotherapy with an array of powerful insights into the interconnective and relational aspects of human experience. Now the field[1] is at it again, prodding detractors and disciples alike with a series of provocative jabs in the ribs. This wake-up call on entrenched ways of viewing and working with families is evident in a steadily accumulating body of work (Anderson & Goolishian, 1988; de Shazer, 1991, 1993; Epston & White, 1992; Goolishian & Anderson, 1992; Hoffman, 1985, 1990; Parry & Doan, 1994; White & Epston, 1990). The "something big" I believe these prominent family practitioners are proposing is a fundamental change in the way we construe our coming to know the world around us, with resounding implications for the theory and practice of family therapy.

The change is inextricably linked to epistemology--that sometimes troublesome, always controversial, but "heart-of-the-matter" (Hoffman, 1985) word that has preoccupied the field since its inception. In this paper, I will characterize the field of family therapy as undergoing a paradigm shift founded on epistemology--a change in direction of equal proportion to the one family therapy visited upon all of psychotherapy with its challenge to established linear and

intrapsychic views. More than a mere revision in our manner of *talking* about the work of therapy (Sluzki, 1988), this shift in perspective brings into being "incommensurably different worlds of action and existence" (Goolishian & Anderson, 1992, p. 10).

Specifically, I will propose that the widespread critique of mainstream family therapy is evidence of this shifting paradigm. I will argue that postmodernism's ubiquitous focus on epistemology--on meaning, interpretation, and the intersubjectivity of knowledge-- cannot be adequately represented by the biological, mechanistic, and linguistic models which frame the systemic orientation of family therapy. I suggest that the central metaphor of families as *systems* is now being subsumed by a view which construes families and other client groupings as interpretive communities, or *storying cultures* . Finally, I will propose that this largely implicit transformation be made explicit to facilitate the convergence of a range of emerging ideas about the practice of family therapy, and indeed psychotherapy in general.

An Evolving Epistemology

Nichols and Schwartz (1991) describe a "philosophic mid-life crisis" (p. 143) which befell family therapy in the 1980's. A preponderance of new ideas emerging from physics, neurobiology, hermeneutics, social constructionism, literary deconstruction, feminism, and cross-cultural studies, to name but a few of the influences, were trained on the basic premises of family therapy. Indeed, this assault on mainstream family therapy appears much like the "period of pronounced professional insecurity" which Kuhn (1970, p. 68) describes as preceding a shift in scientific paradigms. While balking at placing a timeline on this conceptual revolution, I would suggest that the cumulative critique of family

therapy has raised issues beyond the descriptive scope of systemic metaphors for the family--"second-order" or not[2]. The effort to accommodate the new epistemology within the mainstream metaphorical frame of family therapy (Atkinson & Heath, 1990; Auerswald, 1987; Becvar & Becvar, 1988; Bopp & Weeks, 1983; Golann, 1987; Hoffman, 1985; Real, 1990; Simon, 1992) looks increasingly like the movement towards over-complexity which Kuhn (1970) describes as the hallmark of a theory's desperate re-organization in the face of a paradigmatic challenge.

How we Know What we Know : The Foundation of Clinical Practice

While epistemology may seem to reside in a heady conceptual realm far removed from the clinician's doorstep, it is of fundamental concern to the practice of therapy. One cannot operate without epistemological assumptions, although it is possible to be unaware of them. Our theories are founded on epistemology--whether theories of psychotherapy, or personal theories of life manifest in the choices we make on a daily basis. When one considers, then, that epistemology informs all of our beliefs about where problems come from, how they are maintained, and what facilitates their resolution, the distinctions examined here are fundamental.

Because the topic of epistemology is so central to this discussion, it is worth reiterating its typical meaning in philosophical discourse. Epistemology is the study of knowledge, the study not of how the world "really" is, but the rather of how we come to know it. And so "epistemologies aim at understanding understanding" (Von Foerster, 1985, p.5). Questions of reality are left to another discipline, *ontology*.[2] The reason this distinction is here regarded as so critical is simple: family therapy is increasingly directing its attention at the world of experience, the world we can know. In other words, it is shifting its focus to an

epistemological domain, and leaving aside its former preoccupation with the "real" world, which concerns ontology. But the mainstream models of family therapy are firmly rooted in ontological foundations--in models concerned mostly with the way the world "really" is. The resulting tension and confusion are typical of the unsettled period between scientific paradigms (Kuhn, 1970). This abstract premise will become more concrete as the discussion proceeds.

Before examining the assumptions underlying the systemic metaphors of family therapy, it would therefore be useful to survey the changing ideas about "how we know what we know" which are reshaping the landscape of the humanities. In this task, I plead guilty in advance for the omissions and discontinuities I will inevitably perpetrate. Once a distinction is made between the "real" and the "known", the world becomes a complex place indeed. The epistemological debate within family therapy and throughout the humanities has seen countless twists and turns over the past years. The discussion here focuses on developments seen as relevant to the overarching premise of this discussion.

The Locus of Knowledge: From Observed to Observer to the Place Between

In greatly simplified form, it might be said that the prevalent epistemology in the humanities--the view of how we come to know the world-- during this century has been evolving from a focus on the observed world as object, to a focus on the observing person as subject, to a focus on the place between subject and object--the intersubjective domain where interpretation occurs in community with others.

There is nothing particularly "tidy" about this evolution, and many approaches to family therapy display features of epistemological premises which straddle more than one of the stances delineated above (Auerswald, 1987). Nevertheless, I propose that from a 1) a core belief in a knowable reality (Gergen,

1992), a "logical and ordered universe whose laws could be uncovered by science" (Polkinghorne, 1992, p. 147), there has been a movement towards 2) a perspectivist position which concludes that "all description tells us primarily about the person giving the description" (Golann, 1987, p. 332), and gradually to 3) a view which places the locus of knowledge in a *community* of persons, with meaning construed as lying "in between people rather than hidden away inside an individual" (de Shazer & Berg, 1992, p. 74).

Although postmodern thinking is not unified under one coherent philosophy (Kvale, 1992), this growing emphasis on the intersubjective/consensual nature of knowledge reflects a trend in the contemporary zeitgeist. In this paper, I will argue that both the positivist stance typically equated with modernism and the constructivist (Efran et al., 1988; Hoffman, 1985; Simon, 1992) orientation identified with second-order cybernetic views of the family is being replaced by a social constructionist (Gergen, 1985; Goolishian & Anderson, 1992; Hoffman, 1990) view, with powerful implications for the practice of family therapy.

The pragmatic, object-centred epistemology of modernism (Gergen, 1991) is perhaps most readily associated in psychotherapy with behaviorist approaches distinguished by a rigorous attention to data gathering, linear causal sequences, etc. Family therapy came into prominence on the heels of the new physics, which concluded that the *nature* of the world cannot be understood separately from the *relationship* of its various parts (Hawking, 1989). Family therapy therefore emerged from models which replaced behaviorism's linear view with a focus on circularity and relationship. However, as this discussion unfolds, I will argue that the field's systemic metaphors do not inherently address another conclusion of

"new science"--the futility of seeking to gain knowledge of an underlying reality un-hindered by the influence of the observer (Hawking, 1989).

The question of the observer's influence is all about how we come to know the world. In recent years, there has been a dawning awareness of its relevance to family therapy, with the result that the word *epistemology* has been "used, overused, and abused" (Von Foerster, 1985, p. 517) in writings and discussions in the field.

The questions are difficult, but if the "hard" science of physics has been compelled to address them, then certainly they must be tackled head-on by family therapy, and indeed the humanities, because the act of knowing is a distinctly human endeavor. What follows are two epistemological views which have gained an increasingly firm foothold in family therapy, and which are here described as precipitating a paradigm shift now underway in the field.

Constructivism and Social Constructionism: Alternate Frames

Although the terms constructivism and social constructionism both suggest that "the observer generates the distinction we call 'reality'" (Andersen, 1987, p. 416), they are not synonymous. Constructivism is primarily individualistic, focusing on sense data and information processing, while social constructionism is concerned with the person in community and focuses on meaning and interpretation.

Although "constructivism" is not infrequently used more or less interchangeably with "social constructionism" (cf. Efran et al., 1988; Real, 1990), a significant distinction can be made between the two terms. Lynn Hoffman (1990) clarifies a divergence in focus which I will elucidate here because it lays bare the direction of the paradigm shift to which I have referred.

Constructivism is largely informed by research in neurobiology, including the finding (Dell, 1985; Hoffman, 1990) that there is no apparent correlation between the perceived object and what the retinal cells receive. For biologist Maturana (1978), the epistemological conclusion is what he calls "structure determinism" -- that it is the structure of the *perceiving system* which determines the outcome of any interaction with outside systems. In other words, in contrast with a modernist epistemology which construes knowledge as being about an objective world "out there" beyond the observer, constructivism points to the observer as the reference point of knowledge.

Constructivist thinking was the first epistemological wave to break on the shores of family therapy. It has had a large impact on systemic frameworks for viewing the family (Becvar & Becvar, 1988). While systemic metaphors emphasize circular processes, feedback, connection between levels, etc., they are not inherently about how we come to know the world, but rather about how the world *is* . They construe systems as complex entities observed in the world. By turning attention from the *observed* system to the *observing* system, constructivism introduced a new level of complexity to cybernetics, one of the foundations of the family systems view. Thus was born "second-order cybernetics" or "cybernetics of cybernetics", erasing the sharp distinction between observer and observed (Golann, 1987). I believe this convoluted attempt to accommodate an evolving epistemology has rendered unwieldy a range of metaphors for describing families.

While constructivism has been awkwardly embraced by family therapy as described, social constructionism presents a range of new distinctions beyond the pale of the field's conventional systemic frameworks. In formulating *its* epistemological stance, social constructionism turns not to the nervous system, but

to the intersubjective influence of language and culture, as well as the hermeneutical tradition of textual interpretation (Hekman, 1984; Packer, 1985). In so doing, it references knowledge neither in the observed nor the observer, but rather in the place between the two, in the social arena among interpreting subjects.

Berger and Luckmann (1967) unravel a compelling description of this process of coming to know the world, depicting knowledge as a socially negotiated *construction* which takes shape "in a world that we define through our descriptive language in social intercourse with others" (Anderson & Goolishian, 1988, p. 377). Berg and de Shazer (1992) choose the term "post-structuralism" to describe this view, but their emphasis on "the interaction of people as an activity through which meaning is constructed" (p.73) is essentially the same. These related positions reject the notion of knowledge as the function of a solitary observer's structure--an isolationist view which has been construed (Hoffman, 1993) as depicting each of us inhabiting our own "bathysphere".

While social constructionism does not explicitly refute the constructivist view, it arguably subsumes it. As isolated as each of us is within our own biological organisms, so are we also members of a community of interpreting beings. Our bathyspheres are linked by telephone, as it were. So while persons can be seen as processing data in accordance with their unique structures (constructivism), they share with others interpretations of the "text" of their experience. Social constructionism is primarily concerned with the process whereby meaning is arrived at communally. It emphasizes neither the biology of the observer nor the ontology of the observed world, focusing instead on knowledge as a function of communal textual interpretation.

Clifford Geertz calls the text analogy the "broadest and most recent refiguration of social thought" (White & Epston, 1990, p. 9). According to this epistemological view, *meaning* attains primacy, and events are seen as "having a semantic rather than a logical or causal organization" (Packer, 1985, p. 1081). An important consequence of this departure from modernist thinking is that epistemology in effect replaces ontology as the focus of attention, at least in the humanities. In other words, pursuit of the understanding of how the world *is* becomes secondary to the preoccupation with the way we perceive, interpret, and semantically construct it. Lived experience is regarded as the primary reality[4] (Bruner, 1986). As a result, discussion of human action departs from mainstream family therapy's abstracted systemic models and focuses on the seedbeds of semantics: language and culture.

Social Constructionism: Language and Culture as the Locus of Knowledge

The semantic dimension entertained by a social constructionist orientation opens the door to consideration of language and culture in a way that constructivism, with its emphasis on biology, is less equipped to do. Says Sellick (1989):

> Our history is more than a history of biological evolution. We are coupled not only to a biological niche, but also a cultural niche--a world we have created, and are creating, through language, in dialogue, and in community with others. (p. 33).

When experience is regarded as text, conjointly interpreted in community, then language plays the critical role of bearing the distinctions which bring our world into being.

The sense of this view is apparent even in the present discussion: it is language which gives birth to the very concept of "epistemology", language which

enables us to create a distinction between "constructivism" and "social constructionism", or between "table" and "chair" for that matter. As Berger and Luckmann (1967) put it, "language makes the co-ordinates of my life in society and fills that life with meaningful objects" (p.22). The act of knowing and the act of "languaging" (Anderson & Goolishian, 1988) are therefore inseparable, and are regarded as *constitutive*. "World-making" becomes the primary function of mind (Bruner, 1987).

According to this emerging view, language cannot properly be considered in isolation of culture, because language inevitably originates from a cultural milieu, and is typically construed as the feature which most clearly differentiates cultures. And so our claims to truth and right embedded in the words we use to depict our worlds are "more reasonably viewed as the constructions of communities with particular interests, values, and ways of life" (Gergen, 1991, p. 134).

The writings of the French social historian Michel Foucault provide some of the most telling examples of the process whereby knowledge (embedded in language) serves the ends of dominant cultures--to the extent that human sexuality *itself* may be regarded as socially legislated, shaped by normative prescriptions about viewing and communicating about the body (Foucault, 1980). Family therapist Michael White (1992) draws heavily on Foucault's ideas when he describes how each of us enter a world where particular distinctions imbedded in language and culture have been granted truth status:

> These practices and knowledges have been negotiated over time within contexts of communities of persons and institutions that comprise culture. This social formation of communities and institutions compose relations of forces that, in engaging in various practices of power, determine which

ideas, of all those possible, are acceptable - they determine what is to count as legitimate knowledge. (p.124)

The critical implication of the link between language and culture and a conclusion implicit in the quotation above is that cultures--including influential institutional forces within cultures-- propagate values. And so cultures do not create their realities through language in a neutral way, but rather the language distinctions which cultures make are inherently ideological. Says Miller Mair (1988), "we think and speak and act in the forms our culture has prepared. It is through these already existing and unquestioned means that we are molded toward what we suppose we know....we are coated and permeated by the ideology of our place and time." (pp. 129, 135).

Narrative: Container for our Constructions

The social constructionist view therefore places a heavy emphasis on the ways in which we collectively perceive, interpret, and construct our experience to make meaning of it, and thereby shape our worlds. In this context, individuals, families, and whole cultures are accorded a different kind of creative power than that proffered by the modernist formulations, informed by an objectivist epistemology, which gave rise to family therapy's dominant systemic model. If the modernist is an engineer guided by the laws of science, the postmodernist is a storyteller inspired by the imagination. This leads to a further description of our experience which unfolds from a social constructionist view: narrative. While language and culture contribute a context for our creative formulations, narrative provides their form.

Narrative has become a popular means of framing both cultural and individual experience (Bruner, 1987; Combs & Freedman, 1990; Howard, 1991; Parry & Doan, 1994; White & Epston, 1990). When our experience is more

closely equated with constructions than reality, "story" becomes a useful way of describing the package in which it is delivered. Stories incorporate the flow of time, capturing the temporal dimension of experience and our expressions of that experience. Jerome Bruner comes to a pithier conclusion regarding the utility of stories: "narrative imitates life, life imitates narrative" (1987, p. 15).

Theory (Scientific and Otherwise) as Story

The emerging social constructionist epistemology elaborated to this point leads naturally to a conclusion that science--whether 'hard" physical science or "soft" human science--itself represents a body of cultural stories. Like all human creations communicated through language, the work of science can be situated in a cultural context--the scientific milieu. Howard (1991) describes scientific theories as "refined stories (or rich metaphors) meant to depict complex causal processes in the world" (p. 189). When matters of internal consistency or cause and effect are deemed preeminent, we turn to the stories of science. If we want to get at the meaning (rather than the cause) of an event such as a baby's birth or the death of a loved one, we are likely to turn to stories forged in an altogether different cultural context: the stories of literature, philosophy, or religion.

Sellick (1989) makes the same point in reference to the interpretive dimension of our understanding:

> We can begin to see that what we distinguish as "true" as the product of the means by which we distinguished it, that even scientifically established fact is part of the hermeneutic circle of human understanding, and is shaped by the individual preunderstandings and assumptions, as well as the historical, political and ideological climate in which it took root." (p. 23)

Whether the reader is prepared to assign such an interpretive and constitutive function to the physical sciences, it has become commonplace to view psychological theory in metaphorical terms--as stories forged in cultural contexts according to the biases inherent in their particular perspectives. The distinctions represented by terms like *intergenerational boundary, differentiation of self,* and *negative feedback* may all be regarded as metaphorical descriptions valued for their context-specific usefulness and fertility rather than their *accuracy*. This is a paradigm-shattering departure from the assumptions upon which those constructs were founded.

Neither can the present discussion be excluded. It can also be seen as a construction, a story, a postmodern narrative founded on a range of assumptions depicting one way of viewing our experience. The "social constructionist paradigm" which reigns in this discussion is a distinction we "perform" (Maturana, 1978). It does not exist in a wide range of other cultural contexts.

Viewed from this epistemological perch, persons are regarded in terms of their culturally informed world-making practices: "knowledge about society is thus a *realization* in the double sense of the word, in the sense of apprehending the objectivated social reality, and in the sense of ongoingly producing the reality" (Berger & Luckmann, 1967, p. 66). The metaphorical stories we tell--including our theories--are therefore seen as constitutive acts. As such, they are informed by our purposes and intentions, reflecting not so much what *is* as what we deem important. When examining the dominant metaphors of family therapy, then, it is important to consider how well they reflect the way we view our worlds. Inescapably, this brings us back to that heart-of-the-matter word, *epistemology*.

Families as Systems

The systemic view of the family in all of its myriad manifestations has given rise to a dazzling range of metaphorical constructions which have in turn inspired innovative new approaches to working with families [5] (cf. Bowen, 1978; Haley, 1977; Madanes, 1981; Minuchin, 1974; Selvini Palazolli et al., 1978; Watzlawick et al., 1974). Following the social constructionist epistemology of this discussion, these therapeutic approaches can be viewed as cultural expressions emerging from an intellectual milieu and informed by a range of seminal thinkers, including Bateson (1972, 1979), de Saussure (1959), von Bertalanffy (1968), and Wiener (1961).

It is these expressions which are the subject of the aforementioned critique of family therapy--a critique here characterized as the manifestation of an ongoing paradigm shift. In effect, a range of established cultural expressions in family therapy no longer resonate with the meanings of an emerging epistemology. The stories don't fit.

What follows is a highly condensed summary of some of the primary concerns raised in the critique of family therapy. While many of these have appeared in publications over the past decade and more, the intent here is to examine each through a social constructionist lens to demonstrate the incongruence between the field's growing assumptions about how we know what we know, and the predominant metaphors it relies on to depict families.

Absence of Race, Class, and Gender Distinctions

The thermostat was one of Bateson's favorite metaphors. He applied it to the family, arguing that members serve their families in the way that a thermostat's parts help to maintain a steady temperature. While this ingenious view captures systemic interdependence, it obscures any view of interpreting

subjects inhabiting a cultural and historical context where negotiations over "reality" are tempered by social hierarchy. And so issues of race, class, and gender are largely overlooked by systemic practitioners (Hoffman, 1990).

Power and Neutrality

Bateson (1972) referred to the "myth of power" (p. 494), calling it "epistemological lunacy" (p. 495). Dell (1989) says the invalidation of power is an inevitable consequence of adopting a systemic perspective. According to a social constructionist view, however, to tell a community of persons (women, eg.) that the power differentials they experience and name are illusory is inconsistent with the notion that the distinctions we make through language construct the experiential world we inhabit.

In systemic terminology, to speak of victims and abusers in families is to slip into "linear causality". And so familial relations are typically couched in terms of "complementarity", "recursiveness", and "circularity". To explain this divergence from linear thinking, Becvar and Becvar(1988) write: "Thus a sadist requires a masochist, just as a masochist requires a sadist" (p. 62). What is missing, of course, is acknowledgment that the victims of sadists are not, be definition, willing partners. Says Goldner (1985): "the systemic sine qua non of circularity looks suspiciously like a hypersophisticated version of blaming the victim and rationalizing the status quo" (p. 35).

The postmodern view states that power grants privilege--the privilege to have one's story dominate another's, to have one's truth prevail. However, these meanings are foreign to the analysis of biological organisms or electronic feedback mechanisms; when those metaphors are transplanted into family therapy, power remains tellingly absent.

The notion of therapist neutrality--a variation on the theme of power-- is also incongruent with a social constructionist view. Neutrality fails to address the ideological nature of world-making. The meanings generated by therapists, no less than those of clients, are embedded in language and emerge from cultural milieus. Anderson and Goolishian (1988), remind us that our theories--including those about therapy--"are ideologies invented at a moment in time for practical reasons" (p. 373). It is not a question of whether we bring politics into the therapy room, says Michael White (1994), "it's a question of whether we admit it or not".

Functionalism: Persons as Objects

When attention is focused primarily on a behavior's service to the wider context (family, society, eg.), the subjective experience of the behaving person is overlooked. The resulting explanations--such as the notion that symptoms represent family members' attempts to control or re-balance the family--are "functionalist" in nature (Nichols & Schwartz, 1991).

Built on an objectivist foundation, functionalism objectifies persons by interpreting their behaviors in terms of their service (deliberate or not) to the unit of which they are a part, rather than construing human action as exemplifying the meaning-making practices of persons in the world. In effect, functionalist explanations assume our stories are *not* our stories. While a woman's *experience* tells her she is depressed because her life lacks meaning, the adept functionalist "knows" that her behavior is *in fact* an attempt to control her family. Luepnitz (1988) says, "Functionalist historians have argued that lynchings and witch hunts serve a social need, i.e., a cathartic or 'therapeutic' need. Therapeutic for whom? one might well ask" (p. 65).

Adversaries and Hierarchies

The systemic orientation to families frequently leads to a pragmatic clinical approach dressed in the language of "strategies", "maneuvers", and "countermaneuvers". The critique of this demeanour typically cites the emphasis on an adversarial/hierarchical relationship, premised on a perspective which Hoffman (1990) says requires "distance that only compounds the professional distance already bequeathed to psychotherapists by the medical model" (p. 9).

As with other critiques of the predominant metaphors of family therapy, this plea for a more cooperative stance can be seen to be founded on epistemological differences. A hierarchical stance diverges significantly from a "subject-subject" perspective (Goolishian & Anderson, 1992) which encourages an exploration of the world as it is *co-constructed* by therapist and client.

Whose Story is it, Anyway?

Another alienating consequence of this privilege differential is obfuscated communication. Because it is founded upon (increasingly) convoluted systemic models, Parry (1991) says family therapy lacks "metaphorical resonance" in a contemporary context. To the uninitiated, its decrees are obtuse, and thus fail to promote mutual understanding.

> Just as the modernist critic or scholar could claim a privileged position by virtue of an understanding of the underlying structure, myth, or subterranean force that the text expressed, the therapist has retained a privileged vantage point arising out of access to a body of knowledge that explained the client on a different and superior level to her experience of herself. (p. 40)

In other words, the *therapist's* story is given primacy, and that story is taken to be more reflective of the underlying truth than the family's own story about itself.

These recurring criticisms of the system view's alienating tendencies reflect a growing emphasis on respect for the client which follows naturally from a social constructionist perspective. If knowledge is regarded as intersubjective, it is presumptuous to elevate the status of the therapist's interpretation.

Absence of Historical Context

The absence of a temporal dimension to the system metaphor is another widely cited shortcoming. While morphogenesis--the behavior that allows for change--is recognized in a systemic framework, it is overshadowed by the complementary concept of morpho*stasis* . Other central terms like 'homeostasis', 'circularity', and 'autopoeisis' are spatial metaphors which fail to capture temporal flow in the way that "story" and "narrative" do. Hoffman (1985) says mainstream approaches to family therapy overlook the lived experience of the systems they observe: families dwell in time. As a result, a mother may be labeled "overinvolved" when her dominance in the home is the inevitable expression of a widespread historical trend which "family therapists mistake for a clinical disturbance" (Goldner, 1985, p. 35).

Absence of Cultural Context

A social constructionist epistemology which construes knowledge as embedded in language and arising from culture inevitably must call into question any accepted clinical wisdom regarding appropriate hierarchies and boundaries, any normative prescriptions for what constitutes a "healthy" family. When our gaze extends beyond the Western cultures which gave rise to mainstream family therapy, we discover that our fundamental conceptions of the child, of mothers'

love, of the self, and of countless other constructs are widely differentiated across contemporary societies (Gergen, 1985). This comes as no surprise when it is assumed that "the process of understanding is not driven automatically by forces of nature, but is the result of an active, cooperative enterprise of persons in relationship (Gergen, 1985, p. 267). From this perspective, the normalizing edicts of systemic family therapy suffer from a debilitating dose of ethnocentricity.

Contrasting Epistemologies

If (as is argued here) the metaphor of the family as a system fails to match an emerging epistemology, it would seem to follow that it is founded on a contrasting epistemology. What is that view? Following Held and Pols (1985), I submit that the systems view grew not out of assumptions about how we come to know the world, but about how the world *is* . It is founded on ontological--not epistemological-- premises. In other words, "systems" are construed not as a way of describing experience, but as the inherent structure of the "real" world. It is no wonder, then, that the more recent introduction of epistemology (in the conventional, philosophical meaning of the term) into the systemic framework has perpetrated such a muddle.

Held and Pols (1985) and Dell, in his rigorous critique (1985) of Bateson's work, provide cogent support for this thesis. Bateson (1972) claimed that epistemology (how we know) is the *same* as ontology (what is real). He then called his elaborate ecological view an "epistemology", though it was more properly an ontological description of a relational, non-linear world. The result is that while he acknowledged that epistemologies might vary from culture to culture, he left open the possibility that a "local epistemology is *wrong* [emphasis in the original] " (314).

The implication is that the epistemologies of some communities of persons may not conform to the epistemology which he proposes to be somehow universally true. Following social constructionism, however, an epistemology, like any other theory, is a story embedded in language, culture, ideology and history, and is not considered in terms of *truth* or *falsity*. Bateson privileged his ecosystemic picture of the universe, rather than seeing it as a story which both captured the spirit of the times, and resonated with meaning for a large audience. He took his social scientific formulations for truth, rejecting the notion that "social science is but one cultural way of describing events" (Tamasese et al., 1994). It is not surprising, then, that he applied the term "epistemological error" to concepts (like power) which he viewed as being "in disagreement with how the world *is* [emphasis in original]" (Dell, 1985, p. 4).

Any assumption about how the world really is creates the possibility of distinguishing between those who have it right, and those who have it wrong. This exclusionary aspect of the systems view is widely seen as objectionable by critics of family therapy. With the advent of social constructionism, the "universe" of modernism gives way to a "multiverse", with profound implications for how we characterize what is happening when persons (eg. therapists and clients) engage in discourse about the world.

An Outdated Story

These convoluted but critical distinctions help to explain the emergence of a vast matrix of ideas which presuppose an objective understanding of families and their workings. Whether they are founded primarily on cybernetic's closed-system formulations or the more expansive, open-system view of General System Theory, the systemic metaphors of family therapy emerge from disciplines which share traditional science's ontological quest.

That is not to say they are "wrong". But metaphors concerned largely with how the world (or families) "are" will inevitably struggle to accommodate the ascendant emphasis on meaning, interpretation, and intersubjective knowledge. They comprise an outdated story. It is a story which arose in a machine-driven era (Gergen, 1991), a story which became "the very nucleus of a new technology and technocracy" (von Bertalanffy, 1968, p. 4), a story which has proven a prolific source of useful ideas for clinical practice. But it is a story whose metaphorical resonance is waning.

Parry (1993) writes that the worth of an artistic or intellectual movement should be gauged by its "success in holding a mirror to the times its works reflect" (p. 429). Given the current re-shaping of the intellectual landscape, family therapy's portrayal of the family fails to reflect current sensitivities. The notions of expert intervention, of fixing dysfunctions, of therapy as a technology of change, are out of step with a wide range of contemporary assumptions.

Family therapy would be better served at this "developmental stage" (Goolishian & Anderson, 1992) if the useful insights and approaches generated by the systems view could be reconstrued around a body of metaphors which convey how families interpret their experience and construct their realities in a cultural context. We need to frame this dynamic and creative process in a way which accounts for the social interchanges which inform and direct family expressions. Perhaps most of all, we need to return the *person* to the centre of the story of the family, and to construct a narrative which views families as collections of people, rather than biological, mechanistic, or linguistic entities. I believe this largely implicit transformation is already underway. The intention of this article is to articulate and contextualize the emerging paradigm in order to unleash its creative potential.

Families and other Cultures

"Words are like freight engines that are pulling boxcars behind them filled with all their previous meanings" say de Shazer and Berg (1992, p. 79). Those meanings are forged in the crucible of culture. This is, of course, particularly relevant to the practice of therapy in all its manifestations. As therapy is increasingly construed as a process of co-constructing meanings (de Shazer, 1991; Friedman, 1993; Gilligan & Price, 1993; Goolishian & Anderson, 1992; Hoffman, 1990; Parry & Doan, 1994; White & Epston, 1990), it makes sense to depict individuals, families, and other client groupings as *storying cultures*.

Howard (1988) says "a culture can be thought of as a community of individuals who see their world in a particular manner--who share particular interpretations as central to the meaning of their lives and action" (p 190). According to this usage, the word "culture" depicts a collection of people in terms of their world-making practices, and thus gives primacy to the interpretive, constructionist, cultural, and narrative aspects of lived experience which are so widely emphasized in the postmodern debate, and so congruent with social constructionist epistemology. .

However one wishes to view individuals, families, or other groupings of people, they must inevitably be considered in some cultural context. For as Foucault emphasizes, it is impossible to situate ourselves or our actions outside of culture (Madigan, 1992). Writes Mair (1988), "We inhabit the great stories of our culture. We live through stories. We are *lived* by the stories of our race and place" (p. 127).

When used in this way, culture becomes a particularly fertile organizing framework for viewing the family. It suggests a constellation of metaphors related to cultural expression that can be applied to families and which resonate

with their meaning-making practices. Rather than being seen as reactive responses to the disequilibrium of the system, family relations may be seen as the creative expressions of individuals who co-inhabit an interpretive community.

When families are viewed as interpretive communities or storying cultures, family narratives are rich with meaning. Like all cultures, families tell stories of themselves--stories about who they are, about where they have been and where they are going. These stories powerfully portray the status quo; but like all of our individual or cultural meaning-making endeavours, they are also constitutive. To tell a story is to construct one's life.

A cultural framework for viewing the family accommodates this vital narrative and historical aspect of experience, and thus incorporates the temporal dimension so evidently lacking in the construct of system. By viewing the family or any other client grouping as a culture, we are also able to address another major deficiency of the system metaphor: the omission of the wider sociopolitical context of experience. Families are subcultures within the wider culture in the same way that First Nation people, women, or the disabled are subcultures of Canadian society. In the same way that the expressions of Afro-American culture both reflect the influence of the wider society and establish the uniqueness of that cultural subgroup, so do the expressions of families unite them with and differentiate them from the cultures they inhabit.

The notions of power, violence, domination and oppression which are either ignored or contentiously represented in the systemic family metaphor are inevitably built in to cultural metaphors. Each family member can be viewed as a more or less disenfranchised subculture of the family itself, just as families may be seen relative to the normative prescriptions of the wider society. Drawing on Foucault's critique, Madigan (1992) writes "The cost to the person for accepting

society's cultural story of them is often subjugation, restraint, and oppression of all alternative descriptions of themselves they may have entertained" (p. 274). The power of families in society, or individuals in families, can be gauged by the degree of legitimacy accorded their stories.

As well as incorporating the critical dimension of power differentials, the cultural framework contextualizes the relationships between family members in terms of the co-construction of their worlds, rather than their service to the morphostasis/genesis of a feedback mechanism. This to me is a vital distinction. By viewing families and other client groupings as creative communities of people collectively striving to articulate and perform their meanings, we effectively humanize a framework given over to the objectifying practices of technology. Whether the postmodern critique of family therapy is regarded as an intellectual and philosophical exercise or an emotional and value-laden polemic, the consequences of the paradigm shift cited here are the same. The emerging descriptions of families seek to capture human experience, thereby reclaiming the dignity of persons.

Therapy in a New Context

In his critique of what he calls the "circular-systemic paradigm", Erickson (1988) asks:

> What would a family therapy look like that made no pretense of being value free, that included a temporal dimension, that included both persons and relations, that was contextual, that induced the reduction of power differentials between therapist and family, that hoped for, and promoted, the empowerment of families, that valued equality over authoritarianism, and that included an education method as well as the therapeutic? (p. 233)

I believe the answer is a therapy which views families as storying cultures, an approach anticipated by Hoffman (1990): "What intrigues me most right now is the idea that the cybernetic-systems metaphor can be fruitfully replaced by a postmodern, anthropological one" (p. 10). In adopting that cultural anthropological lens, we inevitably adopt a more collaborative orientation to therapy evident in a range of emerging new approaches to working with individuals and families (Friedman, 1993; Gilligan & Price, 1993).

Though the approaches which manifest this orientation differ in a number of ways (cf. Chang & Phillips, 1993; White, 1993; de Shazer, 1993b), they share a social constructionist orientation which eschews objectivist and essentialistic formulations--clients are viewed in terms of their creative, world-making potential. The emphasis is on possibilities (O'Hanlon, 1993) over problems, on how clients construe, and in effect *construct* their situations. While systemically-oriented metaphors strain to accommodate this focus, the focus is intrinsic to a cultural view which places persons in interpretive communities, including the community of which the therapist is also a member.

Space limitations do not permit an in-depth examination here of the varied clinical approaches which exemplify what I describe as a paradigm shift in family therapy. While all focus on client narratives and construe the stories clients bring to therapy as representative of their meaning-making practices, Friedman (1993) loosely separates the approaches into three categories.

Of the emerging approaches to family therapy named here, the "narrative" orientation most explicitly acknowledges the cultural implications of a social constructionist epistemology. Narrative approaches (Epston & White, 1992; Freeman & Lobovits, 1993; Freedman & Combs, 1993; Jenkins, 1990; Kinman, 1994; Hewson, 1991; Maisel, 1994; Parry & Doan, 1994; Tamasese et. al. 1994;

White & Epston, 1990; Zimmerman & Dickerson, 1993) place a strong emphasis on helping clients to identify the cultural context of the stories they bring to therapy in order to facilitate the "re-authoring" of their lives.

The latter two of these three clinical orientations which I am here uniting under the banner of social constructionism are far less explicit in their attention to the cultural origins of the meanings clients bring to therapy. Instead, language itself is regarded as the primary arena, prompting Real (1990) to refer to an emerging "language-based" phase of family therapy.

Solution-focused practice (de Shazer, 1991; de Shazer & Berg, 1992; Lipchik, 1993, 1994; O'Hanlon, 1993, 1993b; Weiner-Davis, 1993) takes a "minimalist" stance (Friedman, 1993, p. 21) and focuses primarily on the construction of solutions by building on exceptions. De Shazer (1993) de-emphasizes external context , claiming, "there is nothing outside of the therapy session that can help us understand what is going on in the session" (p. 89).

The third variation of collaborative, social constructionist therapy Friedman (1993) calls the "reflexive conversation" approach (cf. Andersen, 1987, 1993; Anderson, 1993; Anderson & Goolishian, 1988; Goolishian & Anderson, 1992; Hoffman, 1993; Hoffman-Hennessey & Davis, 1993;) It can be distinguished from the others in its more deliberate eschewal of goals, outcomes, and solutions in favor of an exploratory demeanour. Therapy is construed as a primarily linguistic event, and the therapist as a "master conversationalist" (Anderson & Goolishian, 1988).

Stories are hard to tell, says Miller Mair (1988). "The speaker of a new word, a different story, has to leave the warmth of the tribal fires to live as an outsider, beyond the pale, isolated, often invalidated" (p. 135). The cultural metaphor captures the grandness and scope of this creative--and at times defiant--

process. Common to each of the emerging social constructionist approaches is the postmodern view that new stories, new *worlds*, are ours for the creating, and that the act of creation leads to the demise of what has gone before. Says Parry (1991), "Beliefs are embedded in the story; change the story and old beliefs are *shattered* " (p. 43).

Either/Or or Both/And?

One clear characteristic of the postmodern debate is its openness to a diversity of perspectives without reverting to an "either/or" stance. Despite its preoccupation with the deconstruction of the family system metaphor, this discussion does not aspire to that exclusionary stance. Indeed, the emphasis on the relational aspect of experience is a most welcome contribution of systems thinking, and is inherent in an epistemology which construes knowledge in intersubjective terms. Social constructionism proposes, in effect, that the meanings which constitute our "realities" cannot exist in a vacuum, but rather grow out of our connection to each other.

However, I believe the systemic view *in its application* has engendered some approaches which could be humanized by adapting them to a contemporary framework. In other words, the mechanistic system metaphor could be *subsumed* rather than *supplanted* by the anthropological culture one. And so the notions of boundaries, positive connotation, intergenerational transmission, and a wide range of other concepts which have demonstrated clinical utility could be retained.

For example, boundaries would then be considered relative to the *unique* structure of the family culture and its subcultures, and the interpenetration of its meanings. A positive connotation would be proffered tentatively, as an alternative meaning to be considered among many others. And the phenomenon of intergenerational transmission might be framed as the recurring re-telling of

family stories. This re-visioning of existing descriptions is to some extent evident in emerging approaches; however the possibilities for further re-visions of systemic constructs appears virtually boundless. As such, it represents more than a dressing up of old meanings in new clothes--it is characteristic of the transformational aspect of interpretation so central to this discussion. By changing our meanings, we change our worlds.

Truths and Preferred Meanings

Although I have not attempted to conceal my disagreement with some of the clinical manifestations of cybernetic/systemic thinking, or my excitement about some newer entries into the family therapy field, I do not submit that my argument or the family-as-culture metaphor is a "more true reflection of reality" for reasons that should be obvious by now. I acknowledge the danger of "getting it right" (Amundson, 1994) and I identify with the conclusion that our certainties about the world may also restrict and constrain us (Amundson et. al. 1993). But I also identify with the notion that some interpretations, in some contexts, at some times, deserve to be favored. Charles Waldegrave and his colleagues call these "preferred meanings" (Tamasese et. al., 1994). "Preferable for whom?" one might ask. My answer, though it lacks the precision of a cybernetic formula, is unambiguous: for individuals and communities, *now* . The epistemological trend towards metaphors which construe families in human terms is a welcome move in this direction.

T. S. Elliot's words at the outset of this discussion speak of coming to know a place for the first time. This is just what family therapy is undertaking, by reshaping its view of those prodigiously storying cultures, our families.

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Footnotes

1. de Shazer (1991) argues, and the point is well taken, that it is difficult to narrowly delineate what is meant by the field of "family therapy". But this dilemma also applies to the definition of any other class, and is not of central concern to this discussion. Most of the ideas contained herein apply equally well to psychotherapeutic practices which do not identify themselves with "family therapy", and indeed many are relevant to a wide range of disciplines beyond psychology. To me, this is a reassuring and confirmatory thought. Readers who follow the discussion to its conclusion may see that for reasons which will become apparent, "culture therapy" might be a more appropriate descriptive term.

2. The reader might ask "what precisely *are* the systemic metaphors for the family, and how can you be sure you have 'got it right'?" The question presupposes a "right" meaning. The best I can do is to offer reflections on a community of meanings informed by systemic frameworks primarily based on mechanistic, biological, and linguistic models. This discussion concerns the overall tenor of family practice, and is not targetted at any one precise theory or clinical model.

3. This question is also of concern to the area of metaphysics (Held & Pols, 1985), but for simplicity's sake, the distinction between epistemology and ontology serves the discussion at hand.

4. While "radical constructivism" posits that we literally create the external, physical, underlying reality, social constructionism regards knowledge of that reality as unattainable. In other words, it does not entertain questions of ontology. The "reality" referred to in social constructionism is a "consensual reality" of meaning--not an "objective" reality beyond our senses.

5. I focus on "families" as the typical client grouping for family therapy, although--as Anderson and Goolishian (1988) point out--it may often make more sense to work with a culture (they would say "system") organized around the clients' reported problem.

A Cultural Perspective of Families and Family Therapy

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Abstract

This paper proposes that a family therapy founded on a contemporary, postmodern perspective demands a new range of metaphors for the family and the work of therapy. It is proposed that a perspective which privileges cultural context naturally addresses issues of meaning and language, narrative, politics and practices of power--critical contemporary concerns not adequately encompassed by traditional systemic formulations. By viewing families as cultures, and family members as subcultures, the focus of family therapy shifts from normative prescriptions for family "functionality" to issues of intercultural harmony. While a range of feminist and narrative approaches currently manifest a primarily cultural perspective, it is argued that the deliberate application of a family-as-culture metaphor provides a fertile organizing framework for contemporary family therapy.

The study of culture necessarily entails the study of meaning.

Basso and Selby,

Meaning in Anthropology

This paper is about culture and meaning. It is founded on the view shared by many contemporary anthropologists (Basso & Selby, 1976; Geertz, 1973, 1983; Ruby, 1982; Turner & Bruner, 1986) that one cannot be understood without consideration of the other. In effect, my premise is the flip side of Basso and Selby's above quotation: that the meanings which families bring to therapy cannot be understood without attention to their cultural origins. At a time when family therapy is placing an increasing emphasis on the meaning-making dimension of experience, it would do well to attend to the historo-cultural context in which experience occurs. In the next few pages, I will invite the reader to consider the organic relationship between meaning and culture, to ponder the possibilities of a therapy which embraces the former while opening its arms to the latter--a therapy which views families as cultures.

This paper is also about story, metaphor, and theory. It holds to the premises that 1) the way we work with families is guided by the way we theoretically conceptualize them, 2) our theories about families are akin to stories, inescapably subjective and told from a point of view, and 3) the content and structure of our stories are in large measure guided by the metaphorical frames we place around our experience. Each of these premises will be further elaborated as this discussion unfolds.

Meaning and Family Therapy

That family therapy now regards meaning as an important dimension of experience--and thus central to its purpose--is hardly a bold assertion. The field's earlier preoccupation with behavioral sequences and family structure is being replaced by an interest in beliefs and stories imbedded in language (Hoffman, 1985; Paré, 1994a, 1994b; Real, 1990; Simon, 1988). A wide range of emerging, postmodern approaches to family therapy (de Shazer, 1991; Epston & White, 1992; Friedman, 1993; Gilligan & Price, 1993; Hoffman, 1993; McNamee & Gergen, 1992; White & Epston, 1990) depict the creative subjectivity of clients--their ability to re-construe their worlds in accordance with their values and aspirations-- as the central impetus of change. This shift in emphasis reflects an intellectual and aesthetic ground swell which privileges the interpretive, meaning-making aspect of experience. It is a transformation which naturally calls for a revised story, founded on an updated metaphor for the family.

Postmodernism: Story, Metaphor and Theory

Because this article concerns itself with the words and concepts used by family therapy to describe families and to depict their dynamics, it is, according to conventional usage, a discussion about family therapy *theory*. And yet reference has already been made to *story* and *metaphor* . Before proceeding, then, it would be useful to consider the postmodern view of the relationship between story, metaphor, and theory. For while stories and metaphors have traditionally been viewed as inhabiting a distinct territory from the rarefied domain of theory, the boundary between these areas is increasingly seen to be founded upon an arbitrary elevation of science to the status of truth, and a corresponding devaluing of personal experience.

Within an objectivist/foundationalist framework, a "story" is at best an approximation of reality--a flawed representation clouded by subjectivity and limited by the storyteller's finite knowledge. However, with the segue from modernism to postmodernism, story and narrative assume ascendant significance. Stories are given a place of prime importance when objectivity is rejected as untenable--an ideal of a modernist era which promised the deliverance from suffering through the rational application of science and technology (Gergen, 1991). Stories are of central concern to any perspective which locates persons within a socially constructed world, where meanings are negotiated intersubjectively. When absolutism is replaced by relativism, our views of the world are regarded as framed by our contextual perspectives--we are seen as inhabiting a universe of stories rather than "truths" (Parry, 1991). And so the pronouncements of clients are considered as narratives, rather than fragmentary glimpses of reality. The same may be said of theoretical discussions--this one included. Our scientific and psychological theories *themselves* can be seen as social constructions, metaphorical in nature, and reflective of their historo-cultural origins. This conclusion is of particular interest to this discussion, which is concerned with exploring the implications of a revised theoretical view of the family.

McNamee and Gergen (1992) point to the intellectual sea-change underlying this shift in outlook away from the reification of scientific principles: a trend whereby the philosophy of science as a discipline is being replaced by the history and sociology of knowledge. These latter approaches trace the cultural and historical processes which privilege certain conceptions of nature, while suppressing others. In effect, they argue that "what we take to be accurate and objective accounts of nature and self are an outgrowth of social processes" (p. 4).

And so our scientific theories derive from shared conventions of discourse and may be seen as "refined stories (or rich metaphors) meant to depict complex causal processes in the world" (Howard, 1991, p. 189).

According to the usage of this discussion, the meanings of *story* and *metaphor* are interpenetrating. *Story* emphasizes structure and temporality; *metaphor* allows us "to understand one domain of experience in terms of another" (Lakehoff & Johnson, 1980). Like metaphor, the word *story* suggests a construction of experience rather than a direct reflection of reality. In the absence of a fixed and immutable reference point, stories are characterized by an inherent relativism. They relate experiences to each other, but do not pierce the skin of our humanity to depict things as they *really* are in the absence of observing subjects. In that sense, stories are composed of metaphors.

Lakehoff & Johnson (1980) depict metaphor as a central aspect of our conceptual systems, and point to its proliferation throughout language. In western societies, for example, time is typically conceptualized as a commodity, a view captured by the familiar maxim *time is money*. "Thus we understand and experience time as the kind of thing that can be spent, wasted, budgeted, invested wisely or poorly, saved, or squandered" (p. 8). But of course time may be experienced in many other ways, as is obvious to the western traveler in any culture which places less of a premium on the ticking of the clock. How we view time or money, love, friendship, the family, etc. is reflected in the way we metaphorically frame our experiences of them. And the tenor of those depictions is a function of the time and place from which they originate.

Salman Rushdie writes that all stories are a form of censorship, in that the telling of one story necessarily excludes the telling of others (Sawatzky & Parry, 1993). The same can be said of metaphor. Like stories, metaphors "provide

coherent structure, highlighting some things and hiding others" (Lakehoff & Johnson, 1980, p.39). In the face of a boundless universe, we inevitably act as editors, selecting from our infinite experience. This process is equally active when we construct elaborate frameworks for discussing and doing family therapy: those constructions are inherently metaphorical and necessarily delimiting. And so it is not a question of whether the metaphors we favor are the "correct" depictions of who we are, but rather whether they resonate with the times, and help to direct our attention to those issues of central concern to contemporary social discourse.

Postmodernism cannot be summarized in a few sentences, or even a few books. It is an era of thought and action with no distinct boundaries and no overarching consensual principles. But there are threads of meanings which run through postmodern thinking, and these relate largely to the collapse of an unwavering certainty that a unitary truth exists, or for that matter, is desirable. The postmodern world is a realm of multiple perspectives. And, as discussed earlier, attention has largely shifted from a foundational concern with the measurement of reality to an analysis of the process whereby certain perspectives attain ascendancy. In effect, knowledge is increasingly depicted as the products of cultural and historical forces. This mode of thinking inevitably gives rise to consideration of issues of power and hierarchy because of how these impinge on the propagation of knowledge (Foucault, 1980). It therefore makes sense that our metaphorical view of families should be adapted to reflect these contemporary concerns.

Metaphor of the Family System

For roughly forty years, the depiction of the family as a system has been the predominant metaphor of family therapy. Following the tenor of this discussion, the system metaphor does not reflect the "reality" of the family the

way a mirror reflects light. Instead, it can be seen as a social construction which steers our view in a particular direction, determining the locus of attention when we consider families and other client groupings.

It is a construction which has been much criticized in recent years for its failure to adequately encompass issues of gender, class, race, and power (Erickson, 1988; Goldner, 1985, 1988; Hoffman, 1990; Luepnitz, 1988). Elsewhere (Paré, 1994a), I have proposed that all of these perceived limitations result from the juxtaposition of 1) a metaphor which arose from an era which strongly privileged science and technology, with 2) a range of contemporary concerns founded on a hermeneutic and constructionist perspective decidedly un-technological in its orientation.

Applying one metaphor to another, the family system view can be seen as a lens constrained by its own limited focal length. It largely construes families in biological and mechanistic terms--as objective entities interacting in a complex relational world governed by the principles of circular causality. By guiding our vision in this way, the system metaphor excludes the process whereby we construct our realities in a social context, and in so doing transcend conventional causality--both linear and circular.

Attempts have been made to address this myopia by introducing the confusing notion of "cybernetics of cybernetics", while continuing to cluster descriptions of families around metaphors of feedback, homeostasis, circularity, etc. However, I propose that an alternative approach is to favor and thus give flower to a body of metaphors which more fluidly encompass the social construction of meaning and historo-cultural context. These metaphors are already current in a range of psychotherapeutic contexts. However, they appear not to have been consolidated around a conceptual core in a manner that would

lend them greater clarity and unity. As this discussion unfolds, I will take an exploratory look at the implications of a cultural perspective of families and family therapy.

The Family Culture Metaphor

Webster's (McKechnie, 1977) defines *culture* as "the concepts, habits, skills, art, instruments, institutions, etc. of a given people in a given period" (p. 444). The sense in which I use the word points to the people themselves. Their concepts, habits, etc. are what help us to differentiate them as a distinct grouping of persons. A "culture" therefore shares particular interpretations of the world because of reasons of geography, gender, religion, and other contingencies which play a role in lending a degree of homogeneity to their perspectives. Thus, there is the culture of the Inuit, but also the culture of women, Sufi culture, gay culture, corporate culture, youth culture, etc.

Although the term *culture* is not typically applied to families, it is equally useful for characterizing a group of genetically and/or legally united individuals who share a range of what Bruner (1987) calls "world-making" practices. For all of their differences, family members look upon the world from common vantage points. The meanings they bring to therapy emerge from similar places; their stories are rooted in shared soil.

The clinical utility of this particular mode of viewing families derives from its privileging of those issues of central concern to the postmodern debate. The metaphor of the family as a culture inescapably focuses its lens on families as historically situated, meaning-making entities. This is a dramatic departure from the traditional systemic view, which typically downplays historo-cultural context in favor of analyzing the recursive, internal dynamics of the family (Goldner, 1985, 1988; Hoffman, 1985; Luepnitz, 1988). And because the central metaphor

of culture is primarily concerned with meaning and interpretation, it favors the non-objectivist, non-foundationalist, perspectival orientation of postmodernism. Again, this contrasts with the system view, which originated from a conception of observed, rather than observing systems--a view whose dominant metaphors depict structural and behavioural characteristics of families, rather than their interpretive and meaning-making practices, and those same practices of the therapists who work with them. (Becvar & Becvar, 1988; Golann, 1987; Hoffman, 1990).

Families, like women, gays, or other "interpretive communities" (Erickson, 1988) are subcultures of the wider society. In this respect, they have a greater or lesser voice as a function of the degree to which they are marginalized due to socioeconomics, race, religion, normative prescriptions, etc. In a postmodern context, the "health" of persons is considered less a function of so-called objective criteria than it is of their ability to overcome that marginalization--to have their hopes and aspirations addressed, their stories heard. And so this metaphorical re-construal of the family naturally confronts the inescapably political nature of therapy, and indeed of living. Issues of power and hierarchy are inherent to any cultural view of families.

Besides situating families in a wider context, the cultural framework can be applied in ever-narrowing spheres to *family subcultures* as well. In Canada, the meeting of the Anglophone and Francophone cultures resulted in the hybrid culture which is Canadian society. In a family, two individuals with unique and distinct cultural backgrounds come together to create the new culture of their family. Within the context of this family, these two individuals, the parents, can be seen as the dominant culture--the principle conduits of the family's prevailing social constructions. The children can be construed as a somewhat disenfranchised

(or at least less powerful) subculture of the family, inheritors of a blend of social constructions from both founding nations, as it were.

Reaping further the offshoots of this metaphorical view, and adhering to a non-essentialist postmodern perspective, the "problem" which a family presents is construed as a problem only insofar as the family describes it as such (de Shazer, 1991). When an objectivist orientation is abandoned, problems are construed not as the reality of an observed system, but as social constructions emerging from particular interpretive communities and reflective of those communities' historo-cultural origins[1].

It is my impression that the metaphorical construal of the family as a culture within the wider culture of society is already implicitly current in a growing body of family therapy literature inspired largely by White and Epston's (1990) seminal volume *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends* . I think the intra-familial extension of this way of thinking--which depicts family subgroupings as subcultures--is less current, but emerging, as a growing emphasis is placed on the responsibility of family members to each other (Jenkins, 1993; White, 1992). Just as the deliberate application of the metaphor of the system to the family has spawned a wide range of theoretical and clinical expressions, so does the cultural view provide fertile soil for related metaphors. In Lakehoff & Johnson's (1980) terms, one metaphor "entails" another, opening up whole new vistas worthy of further exploration.

Entailments of the Family Culture Metaphor

In their systematic exploration of the role of metaphor in language, Lakehoff and Johnson (1980) show how the manner in which we conceptualize things is manifest in the metaphors we use in everyday speech. Each of these is evidenced in a range of expressions which are special cases of the metaphor. For

example, *love* is conceptualized in terms of a range of metaphors, including *love is magic* and *love is a physical force*. The former is found in expressions like "She cast her *spell* over me. The *magic* is gone...She is *bewitching* " (p. 49). Examples of the latter are "I could feel the *electricity* between us. There were *sparks*. I was *magnetically drawn* to her" (p. 49), etc. (all emphasis in the original).

Each metaphor entails a vast constellation of assumptions tied to the concept imbedded in the metaphor itself. If love is magic, then it likely operates in mystifying ways beyond the comprehension of mere mortals, and is probably better left to magicians. Thus the metaphor *love is magic* in effect constructs one version of the "reality" of love, and in this case, it encourages a fanciful and fatalistic approach to affairs of the heart.

In contrast to this, Lakehoff and Johnson's alternative metaphor "Love is a collaborative work of art" (p. 139) entails an entirely different range of assumptions, including "Love is work. Love is active. Love requires cooperation" (p. 140). In other words, what love "is" for us is reflected in how we construct love through language; and those constructions limit our experience of love and direct our related behaviours in specific ways.

In a similar manner, metaphors for the family--ie. the family as a system, the family as a culture-- entail a range of assumptions. They establish frames for the way we conceptualize families, which in turn has implications for what we look for when we research families, how we teach family therapy, and how we approach clinical practice.

When the family is viewed as a *system*, family members are regarded as *components* of the system. And so we are likely to assume their behavior is best understood in terms of their roles or functions within that system. We are also

likely to construe conflict or "problems" relative to issues of systemic balance. And so on: these and dozens of other assumptions are current in an assortment of systemically-inspired approaches to family therapy. They are the conceptual outgrowth of the family-as-system metaphor.

What follows, in no particular order, are a number of entailments which similarly follow when the family is viewed as a *culture* . Each of these is followed by an elaboration of its implications. Some of these assumptions are already somewhat prevalent in the work of a range of family practitioners, while I believe others to be more novel, and as yet relatively unexplored. It is important to note that these are not seen as the *inevitable* assumptions which follow from a family culture metaphor; metaphors breed metaphors according to each individual's subjectivity. However, I do believe that this alternative metaphor for the family gives rise to a group of related conceptualizations which resonate loudly with postmodern, constructionist thinking, and hold out considerable utility for clinical practice.

1. *Actions and statements of family members can be seen as expressions of cultural meanings* .

A therapy which rejects foundationalist assumptions will naturally aspire to understand family meanings and interpretations, as opposed to determining the underlying "truth" of the family's situation. Contemporary thinking holds that these meanings and interpretations are not created in vacuums, but rather are reflective of historical and cultural context. By regarding the family as a culture, the therapist may then construe what family members do and say as expressions of cultural meaning. This includes the meanings of the wider cultures (political, ethnic, religious, etc.), but also the meanings of the family culture itself.

In describing the approach he has evolved in attempting to understand how the people of various cultures view themselves, anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1976) says he proceeds by "searching out and analyzing the symbolic forms - words, images, institutions, behaviors - in terms of which, in each place, people actually represented themselves to themselves and one another" (p. 224). Geertz argues that we cannot get inside another people's skin, and adds: "preferring, like the rest of us, to call their souls their own, they are not going to be altogether keen about such an effort anyhow. The trick is to figure out what the devil they think they are up to" (p. 224).

In other words, the meanings we all hold are represented in our expressions, which cultural anthropologist Victor Turner calls the "crystallized secretions of human experience". This experience can be seen as bound by cultural context. For family therapists, this provides an opening to a consideration of the symbols, ceremonies and stories (Combs and Freedman, 1990) common to the particular consensual realities that families share and squabble over, like societies, in not always equal measure.

Symbols are the building blocks of metaphors, and any story or ceremony with meaning for the family is rife with them. Family symbols might range from grandfather's bible collecting dust on the study shelf to junior's motorcycle parked out front. Like societies themselves, family members rally around or protest against their symbols as an expression of the ongoing negotiation over reality which is inherent to any dynamic culture.

Turner (1986) says cultures are best understood through their rituals (or ceremonies), because it is through ritual that people try to articulate meaning. It could be argued that the most mundane of daily habits are themselves rituals which speak of beliefs and priorities in a less deliberate manner. But rituals,

whether it is the purchase of a new car for the child who graduates or candlelit dinners without the kids after the mending of marital tiffs, are eloquent statements of values--and thus speak richly of the interpretive worlds families inhabit.

2. *Family Therapy Involves the Meeting of Cultures.*

A cultural perspective for family therapy inescapably addresses the role of the therapist in the therapeutic encounter. Just as families and their members can be seen as cultures, bearing historical meanings, so are therapists the envoys of their own unique communities of interpretation. In this sense, family therapy (or individual therapy, for that matter) is seen as an intersubjective creation of meaning which happens in the context of the meeting of cultures.

Like travellers in half-familiar lands, therapists are confronted with their own assumptions, needs, values, etc. by virtue of their journey over a skewed landscape which may resemble home territory, but will never precisely mirror it. Writing within an anthropological context, Myerhoff and Ruby (1982) depict this coming-to-know-oneself by encountering another: "It is through the understanding of self-to-other that the investigator comes to examine culture" (p. 18). Inevitably, therapists receive the cultural meanings of families in the context of their own cultural meanings. Given the one-up position of therapists by virtue of their role, this suggests the critical importance of attending to the potential "colonizing" impact of their pronouncements.

When therapy is seen as the meeting of cultures, the modernist conception of a neutral observer collecting objective data from clients disintegrates entirely. Instead, the theories guiding therapists are seen as "ideologies invented at a moment in time for practical reasons" (Anderson & Goolishian, 1988, p. 373), and therapy itself is seen as a political encounter calling

for acute responsibility and openness on the part of therapists (Cross, 1994; McLean, 1994; White, 1994,).

Amundson et al. (1993) warn against the potentially detrimental impact of a position of certainty on the part of therapists, "Under the banner of 'treatment', therapists and other professionals often descend upon families in much the same way that colonists descend upon a new land" (p. 112). In the context of this discussion, therapy is inherently and invariably a cross-cultural phenomenon calling for cultural sensitivity on the part of therapists. Says Waldegrave (Tamasese et al., 1994), "Therapy that does not address cultural meaning is racist".

Tamasese and her colleagues at New Zealand's Family Centre (1994) place a primary emphasis on this cross-cultural aspect of family therapy. They employ "caucuses" (Tamasese & Waldegrave, 1993) of people representing particular cultures in the sense that the word is used here (eg. women, or ethnic minorities) with whom therapists and clients dialogue on issues surrounding the therapeutic work.

Michael White (McLean, 1994) similarly stresses the importance of therapist accountability, and of the accountability of perpetrators of abuse to those they have victimized. In his own work with abusive males, he consults with women, on the premise that "it is never possible for us, as men, to be secure in the idea that we are not inadvertently reproducing ways of being and thinking that might be experienced as dominating by those who have been in the subjugated position" (McLean, 1994, p. 77). The men themselves regularly report to their partners and children, or to forums of other men, in order to ensure accountability as they explore alternative ways of being and acting.

The notion of accountability, and the employment of caucuses which bear witness and provide feedback to therapeutic work are intrinsic to a cultural perspective which emphasizes collaboration and equity over normative prescriptions for individuals and families. In effect, the shift from the foundational thinking of modernism to a pluralistic postmodern view calls for a re-thinking of the very task of family therapy.

3. *The Task of Family Therapy is to Facilitate Cultural Harmony.*

In a postmodern context, words like "healthy" and "dysfunctional" which are intended to characterize the status of clients' lives and lifestyles lose their currency. Instead, they are seen as founded upon arbitrary, prescriptive premises. Healthy compared to what and according to whom? If one holds that the *usage* of words determines their meaning (Wittgenstein, 1963), then local (ie, culture-specific) usage is privileged, and the definition of "health" is rightly left to those to whom the word is applied.

While in many regards, a therapy steeped in modern premises aspires to lead clients towards the norm, a postmodern family therapy founded on a cultural metaphor lionizes unique cultural identities. In other words, it embraces cultural relativism: the peoples of the world are seen as a richly diverse assembly, and divergence from the norm is *celebrated* rather than construed as cause for corrective action. Further still, such a perspective may depict the ubiquitous pressure to conform to the parameters of social institutions as a primary source of *distress* in peoples' lives (White and Epston, 1990; Epston & White, 1992).

When individuals (including therapists) and families are viewed from a cultural perspective, the task of family therapy may be construed as the *facilitation of cultural harmony*. Rather than aspiring to what is inevitably an arbitrary ideal of health or functionality, such a therapy aims to join with families

in a focus on relationship: the therapist-client relationship; the relationship between the family culture and other cultures--including the dominant culture; and the relationships between members of the family culture.

At the level of therapist and client, this approach entails a non-hierarchical and collaborative relationship (Friedman, 1993) characterized by a frankness on both sides regarding the therapeutic process itself. Therapist transparency (Freeman & Lobovits, 1993; McLean, 1994) involves the overt acknowledgment of the inescapable power differential built into the relationship, as well as the open sharing of therapist biases, and a discussion of the uniquely personal origins of therapist questions (Madigan, 1993).

When it is focused on the relationship between families and the wider culture, a culturally-oriented family therapy attends to issues of social justice (Tamasese et al., 1994). For the relationship of the family culture with the wider culture may be hampered by issues of hierarchy, including racism or material inequities. Whether the family which experiences itself as disenfranchised redresses the problem by repositioning itself in society, or by reinterpreting its context and thus re-constructing its reality, the effect is the same: it establishes a new relationship which allows it to live in greater harmony with surrounding cultures.

Following this thinking, family therapy would also be concerned with harmony among the subcultures of the family. In the same way that the cultural view demands responsibility on the part of therapists in their interaction with families, it also calls on family members to confront their own responsibility to each other. As mentioned, Jenkins (1993) and White (McLean, 1994; White, 1992) adopt this approach in their work with abusive men. Rather than labeling the man according to an arbitrary standard of mental health/pathology,

accountability is emphasized, and therapy attends to the impact of abusive behavior on other family members.

This attention to personal responsibility follows on the implicit assumption that in a pluralistic universe, the notion of a context-free truth is untenable. Rather than aspiring to the "right" (ie. healthy, normal, functional, self-actualized, etc.) way of being, we attend instead to the consequences of our actions on others. Without an ultimate arbiter of right and wrong, we strive for mutually satisfying compromise. In the terms of this discussion, this implies that coexistence with others is a project of a kind of intercultural give and take--a respectful exchange of meanings, a negotiation towards harmony, a quest for justice.

I believe this attendance to the impact of practices of power *within* the family is currently one of the growing edges for a culturally-oriented family therapy. White's (McLean, 1994; White, 1992) work is a case in point. Although family members are not identified with problems--a separation facilitated by "externalizing conversations"--they are construed as having been "recruited" into the problem stories they bring to therapy. Although they are not held to *blame*, their role as the life support system of the problem (White & Epston, 1990) is acknowledged. In this sense, they are seen as the occasional agents of oppression *within* their own family cultures.

Physical abuse clearly lends itself to this perspective; it might be construed as a violation of one culture by another. But violence is just one form of violation. In those instances when harmony within the family is impaired by one member's subjugation of other members' stories, it may be insufficient to join with the family in a stand solely against forces emanating from *outside* the family culture. If certain family members experience a silencing of their voices, a

curtailment of their rights from within the family culture, it presents an issue of basic human justice which needs to be addressed.

This ties in to the notion of responsibility. Whether there is "abuse" per se or not within the family, family members need to take ownership of their roles in promoting or hampering harmony between family subcultures. A gratifying assumption implicit in this position is the notion of personal agency. To own one's responsibility is to acknowledge one's freedom to act, and to face up to the accountability and opportunity which this assumption presents.

4. *Individuals may be considered in Pluralistic, Cultural Terms.*

Because this particular entailment of the culture metaphor is more hypothetical in nature, it will only be considered briefly in this context. The notion of a pluralistic identity is congruent with a postmodern view which eschews essentialistic formulations of selfhood. It is a view which also resonates with cultural metaphors. Each individual inhabits many cultures--the cultures of family, gender, race, politics, etc. A person's self-story differs within each of these. Gergen (1991) argues that self is only identified in relationship, and that "for the personality, there is no self outside of that which can be constructed within a social context" (p. 154). Schwartz (1988) depicts individual personalities as composed of internal families or subselves; Mair (1977) writes of the "community of self"; White (1994) speaks of each of us as having "many wills".

Each of these depictions of individuals shares the view that individuals are more usefully viewed not as unitary and unvarying beings, so much as bundles of meanings deriving from a multiplicity of cultural origins. The Arabic poet Samie Ma'ari deftly captures this perspective: "Identities are highly complex, tension filled, contradictory, and inconsistent entities. Only the one who claims to have a

simple, definite, and clear-cut identity has an identity problem" (quoted in Gergen, 1991, p. 155).

Following this metaphorical stream, the picture emerges of an approach to individual therapy which blends almost seamlessly with the culturally-oriented family therapy explored here. As discussed, the work would not be guided according to normative prescriptions for mental or emotional health, but would rather focus on relationship--in this case the relationship between the pluralistic voices, "subselves", or "subcultures" of the individual. The individual's developmental task would be oriented towards harmony of the "parts" of the self, with no prescriptive formulations for what those parts should look like, or how they should behave.

Towards a Postmodern View of the Family

In this paper, I have proposed that as family therapy increasingly focuses on meaning and interpretation as intrinsic to the intersubjective realities we inhabit, it would do well to incorporate cultural metaphors more explicitly into its conceptual framework. A view of families which encompasses their historo-cultural context inevitably accommodates a wide range of concerns which are central to the postmodern debate. These include issues of hierarchy and power, social constructionism and cultural specifications, responsibility and accountability.

The theoretical and clinical outgrowth of a cultural perspective of the family is already evident in a wide range of existing work--particularly approaches identified with feminist and narrative family therapy. However, while the analogy of the system has clearly served a useful role as an organizing metaphor for family therapy for several decades, it seems that postmodern, constructionist approaches have not yet been consolidated in the same way.

Cultural concerns are increasingly being given greater attention (Markowitz, 1994), but "culture" has not been explicitly embraced as a vital, referential metaphor.

Metaphors do not mirror reality, but they help to structure our experience and guide our actions (Lakehoff & Johnson, 1980). They keep us *honest* : by directing our attention to those issues we deem most important, they ensure that the work we do is congruent with the values we hold. To overlook cultural context in a preoccupation with finding "solutions" to a family's dilemma creates the risk of duplicating the cultural practices which have given rise to their distress (Maisel, 1994). The result is a subversion of a genuine striving for an equitable resolution, a lasting peace. It is no longer tenable to isolate meaning and language from their cultures of origin, nor to separate knowledges from the practices of power which privilege some over others. The metaphor of the family culture elevates these critical concerns to the important place they deserve.

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Footnotes

1. More correctly, the problem can also be seen as the construction of an ever-widening constellation of interpretive communities or cultures, including ethnic, religious, gender,and political communities of which the family and its members form subcultures.

The New Social Constructionist Approaches to Family Therapy

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Abstract

This paper proposes that a new generation of social constructionist approaches is changing the direction of family therapy. The focus on systemic interaction is being replaced with a privileging of the meaning-making and interpretive dimensions of experience. The resulting clinical applications place a higher emphasis on clients' abilities to construct solutions on the strength of their own resources, and on the constitutive power of language and conversation. Three streams of social constructionist family practice are contrasted and compared under the general heading of "collaborative family therapy".

Across a wide swath of contemporary theory and practice, the metaphors of family therapy are being rewritten. The modernist-inspired analogy of the family as a system is being overshadowed by metaphors which grant primacy to the meaning-making dimensions of families and family therapy. In this paper, I will survey the philosophical and clinical underpinnings of these emerging approaches. I will also propose that they can be grouped together under a single conceptual umbrella--a postmodern perspective informed by a social constructionist epistemology .

For the purpose of drawing distinctions between these related therapeutic orientations, and following Friedman (1993), they will here be identified by the headings of narrative, solution-focused, and reflexive conversation. When distinguishing them from more long established (ie. "mainstream") approaches to family therapy such as strategic, structural, Bowenian, or Milan schools, I will describe them as "collaborative", based on their emphasis on collaboration in the therapist-client relationship.

My central premise is that these ascendant approaches can be seen as united by a social constructionist epistemology which focuses on metaphors of language and culture--just as the range of traditional family therapy approaches (cf. Bowen, 1978; Haley, 1977; Madanes, 1981; Minuchin, 1974; Selvini Palazolli et al., 1978; Watzlawick et al., 1974) may be construed as huddled under the metaphor of the family as a "system". Like all therapeutic frameworks, these new perspectives overlap with each other and cannot be precisely demarcated, just as they cannot be absolutely delineated from the perspectives with which they are being contrasted. It is a case of figure-to-ground: the orientations to be examined grant primary emphasis to a number of streams of thought and practice which

distinguish them in fundamental ways from mainstream approaches to working with families.

As indicated, these emerging approaches profess a strong commitment to respect for and collaboration with clients. They place an emphasis on clients' personal agency--their ability to create their own realities on the strength of their own resources. They focus on solutions and de-emphasize problems. And they heavily emphasize the use of language and the constitutive power of conversation. They therefore share a number of characteristics reflecting their common epistemological roots, and consistent with the zeitgeist of postmodernism.

Collaborative Approaches in Brief

Narrative family therapy [1] can be clustered around the work of Australian Michael White and his colleague David Epston from New Zealand. This approach seeks to foster a sense of personal agency in clients so that they may "re-author" their lives in defiance of oppressive narratives originating from dominant cultures. Like solution-focused work, the narrative approach avoids identifying clients with problems. Narrative approaches (Epston & White, 1992; Freeman & Lobovits, 1993; Freedman & Combs, 1993; Jenkins, 1990; Kinman, 1994; Maisel, 1994; Parry & Doan, 1994; Tamasese et. al. 1994; White & Epston, 1990; Zimmerman & Dickerson, 1993) place a strong emphasis on helping clients to identify the cultural context of the stories they bring to therapy--to deconstruct the problem stories in order to create space for preferred stories.

Solution-focused practice and the reflexive conversation approaches are less concerned with cultural context than narrative practice. Instead, language itself is regarded as the primary arena, prompting Real (1992) to refer to an emerging "language-based" phase of family therapy. But language cannot itself be

cleanly dissected from society or culture. And so while these latter approaches mainly stress language, they construe the meanings carried by language as emerging from communities of persons.

Solution-focused practice is typically identified with Steve de Shazer, Insoo Berg, and colleagues at the Brief Family Therapy Centre in Milwaukee. Practitioners (de Shazer, 1991, 1993; de Shazer & Berg, 1988,1992; Lipchik, 1993, 1994; O'Hanlon, 1993, 1993b; Weiner-Davis, 1993) focus primarily on the construction of solutions by building on exceptions. By emphasizing goals rather than problems, they avoid pathologizing clients (de Shazer, 1991).

The third variation of collaborative, social constructionist therapy Friedman (1993) calls the "reflexive conversation" approach[2]. It is most closely associated with the work of Harlene Anderson and the late Harry Goolishian (Anderson, 1993; Anderson & Goolishian, 1988; Goolishian & Anderson, 1992), as well as Norway's Tom Andersen (1987,1993), the pioneer of the reflecting team approach to family therapy. Recently, Lynn Hoffman (Hoffman, 1993; Hoffman-Hennessy & Davis, 1993) has aligned herself more closely with this approach as well.

Reflexive conversations can be contrasted sharply with most other approaches to therapeutic interviews in that they self-consciously eschew a focus on goals or outcomes in favor of searching for new meanings and creating space for the sharing of the "unsaid" (Hoffman-Hennessy & Davis, 1993), or what is "not yet known" (Anderson & Goolishian, 1990). Therapy is construed as a primarily linguistic event, and the therapist as a "master conversationalist" (Anderson & Goolishian, 1988).

Because this paper aims to depict the emergence of a distinct generation of family therapy, I will sacrifice a precise delineation of sub-genres in favor of an

overview of the three approaches featured. It seems likely that I will blur some edges which some may see as distinct, and alternately draw some sharp distinctions not perceived by others. These are the traces of a broad brush stroke. True to the approaches here featured, I submit that regardless of the detail rendered, a true "objectivity" is unobtainable. What follows is one person's view of some ascendant therapeutic frameworks. I hope the discussion stimulates further exploration.

Philosophical and Ideological Underpinnings

When unearthing the foundations of these new approaches to family therapy, the most apparent unifying factor is their adherence to an epistemology which emphasizes the intersubjective dimension of meaning. Although White has used the terms "critical constructivist" (1992) and "constitutionalist" (1993), and de Shazer refers to "interactional constructivism" (de Shazer, 1991) and "post-structuralism" (de Shazer & Berg, 1992), the three collaborative approaches explored here clearly stress the "interaction of people as an activity through which meaning is constructed" (de Shazer & Berg, 1992, p. 75).

Following Gergen and others (Gergen, 1985, 1991; Goolishian & Anderson, 1992; Hoffman, 1990; Hoffman-Hennessy & Davis, 1993), I here characterize that position as social constructionism. Put simply, social constructionism is founded on the notion that the meanings of all words--from "depressed" or "dysfunctional" to "normal" and "healthy", to name a few which arise frequently in the therapeutic milieu--are forged in social contexts, and that those meanings, in effect, comprise the "realities" we inhabit.[3] Social constructionsim does not preclude the position--known as constructivism--that knowledge is a function of the unique structure of each individual (Maturana,

1978). However, a social constructionist position widens the view and observes that knowledge is *also* a function of those characteristics which render us *similar* : we share somewhat common perspectives, and arrive at interpretations and meanings through social discourse. This construal of experiential reality as socially constructed is both a hallmark of postmodern thinking and a pivotal premise of each of the collaborative approaches.

For White (1992) and other narrative practitioners, the social construction of reality is a ubiquitous process encompassing the full sweep of cultures and their histories. He therefore construes the meanings that clients bring to therapy as "historically constructed and negotiated in communities of persons, and within the context of social structures and institutions" (p. 124).

Solution-focused practitioners--like reflexive conversationalists-- also view the clients' worlds as constructed, rather than given. But they eschew the narrative focus on social processes and the practices of power. Both de Shazer (1991) and Goolishian and Anderson (1992) construe our experiential worlds as created by language. De Shazer and Berg (1992) compare words to freight engines, "pulling boxcars behind them filled with all their previous meanings" (p. 79). Those boxcars have been fashioned communally: the meanings comprise our *consensual* realities and are never constructed in isolation.

The perspectivist and constructionist emphases which permeate these contemporary practices is not wholly absent in mainstream approaches to family therapy. The distinctions of observed versus observing systems and of second-order cybernetics or "cybernetics of cybernetics" have been introduced into mainstream models to account for the inescapable relationship between subject and object (Becvar & Becvar, 1988; Golann, 1987; Hoffman, 1985; Nichols & Schwartz, 1991; Simon, 1992). What distinguishes narrative, solution-focused,

and reflexive conversation approaches, however, is the weight accorded to what White (1992) calls a *constitutionalist* orientation--the notion that persons' lives are shaped by the meaning they ascribe to their experience.

In mainstream family therapy approaches, this constitutive--what Bruner (1987) calls "world-making"--power is a veneer laid on a systemic substratum. The interplay of systemic components is still the central focus. Among the collaborative approaches, attention turns *primarily* to the intersubjective construction of new meanings. The generative potential of clients is privileged, and systemic analysis recedes to the background. When such analysis does occur, it is not towards an explanation of problem patterns, but as a means of deconstructing entrenched meanings and creating space for alternative ones.

Though each of the collaborative approaches to family therapy discussed here have roots in systemic concepts and approaches, they can be seen to transcend those origins. In effect, they offer a paradigm-shifting alternative to mainstream practice (Paré, in press). A social constructionist perspective gives rise to a view of therapeutic context and family process which contrasts sharply with the overall tenor of traditional family therapy.

View of the Problem

Hoffman (Simon, 1988) describes a movement in family therapy away from the preoccupation with behaviors to a focus on meaning. Elsewhere (1985), she says "mental phenomena have been brought back from a long exile, and idea, beliefs, attitudes, feelings, premises, values and myths have been declared central again" (p. 390). This privileging of *constructions* of the world--both those which clients bring to therapy, and those which emerge through conversation--is particularly representative of the collaborative approaches to family therapy.

Problems--even undesired behavioral sequences--are construed more as the consequence of malleable interpretations than as concrete facts.

While the collaborative approaches share a focus on the intersubjectivity of meaning and the constitutive or creative potential of persons, they nevertheless show some divergence around their view of the problem. The narrative perspective in particular can be clearly distinguished from the others by the emphasis it places on the power hierarchies present in all societies, and their role in the promulgation of collective meanings.

Michel Foucault, whose thinking creates the frame for much of Michael White's work, equates knowledge with power (1980), and describes the process whereby the power of society's institutions transcends mere physical compulsion and extends to the very definition of "personhood". Thus, the "consensual reality" is not arrived at truly democratically. Says White (1993), communities of influence, by "engaging in various practices of power, determine which ideas, of all those possible, are acceptable--they determine what is to count as legitimate knowledge" (p. 124). Maisel (1994) describes as "power-blind" any therapy which fails to recognize the process whereby persons enter into their own subjugation in an attempt to mold themselves to cultural specifications. From this perspective, therapeutic "problems" are seen in terms of the discrepancy between the clients' own meanings or stories and those imposed upon them by institutional forces in society.

In solution-focused practice, clients are seen as stuck by their rigid and inflexible view of their contexts. But in the same way that the narrative approach distinguishes problem and client, so does solution focus shun any identification of person and problem. De Shazer (1991) prefers to construe a "problem" as "anything that requires the doing of something" (p. 82). Furthermore, he sees that

something that requires doing as suggested by the problem, because all "problems" imply "nonproblems". For example, to know what "anxious" means, we must also know "nonanxious". Thus the exception ("nonanxiety") to the problem of "anxiety" is built into the very definition of the problem, and exceptions are the seeds of solutions. Solution-focused practioners construe clients' complaints as arising from either/or thinking (Chang & Philips, 1993; Lipchik, 1993), or the tendency to fixate on the problem side of every problem/exception. This description nevertheless does not become central to the work of therapy. To dwell on the origins of problems is to preclude focusing on solutions.

Not untypically, the reflexive conversation approach is more elusive on the subject of the problems clients bring to therapy. Tentativeness, a demeanour favored somewhat by all three approaches, is most pronounced in the recent writing of Anderson and Goolishian, Hoffman, and others. Anderson and Goolishian (1988) have written of "problem-organizing" and "problem dis-solving" systems, and more recently (1992) have argued that the language of our theories plays a role in creating those problems in the first place. The implication is that even to speculate about the origins or nature of problems is to perpetuate them. While this view resonates somewhat with a solution-focused perspective, reflexive conversationalist similarly shun a focus on *solutions* . Hoffman and Davis (Hoffman-Hennessy & Davis, 1993) voice their suspicion of exact therapeutic goals. They argue that a focus on outcome leads to attempts to control the session, and note that "the more you push, the less likely it is to happen" (p. 371).

Despite these differences, the collaborative approaches can all be seen as dispensing with causal analysis, which is founded on objectivist (vs. perspectivist)

assumptions. If events are what we *make* of them, they cannot be construed as causal agents in our conventional way of thinking. When one meaning shifts, others follow. For example, the client who reports low self-esteem "because" of harsh parental treatment may discover a shift in self-perception upon viewing childhood scoldings as the awkward but earnestly loving efforts of struggling new parents. While reframes of this sort are among the *techniques* of various mainstream approaches, they are seen as fundamental acts of world-making by collaborative therapists.

Structuralist and functionalist accounts of problems are therefore rejected outright. To apply a structuralist[4] analysis to a problematical behavior - for example, to assert that mother is depressed *because of* an overly permeable boundary, or that her anxiety *results from* a lack of differentiation from her family of origin - is to revert to causal explanations which both fail to promote personal agency, and which replace the family's own story with the therapist's constructions. Functionalist explanations which attribute a *role* to the problem similarly undermine the family's meaning-making process by superimposing outside interpretations on their unique experience.

Therapeutic Context and Relationship

All of the collaborative approaches construe therapy as the co-construction of meaning. Implicit in this view is a non-hierarchical stance which deliberately emphasizes respect for client resources. For narrative practitioners, however, the mutuality of the therapeutic relationship must be guarded vigilantly. White (1994) says it is not a question of whether clinicians take politics into therapy, but rather whether they acknowledge it. This view is consistent with the construal of knowledge as power, and the potential "colonizing" impact (Tapping, 1993) of

psychotherapy. Tamasese points out (Tamasese, Tuhaka, & Waldegrave, 1993) that "social science is but one cultural way of describing events"--a cogent reminder to practitioners of the risk of granting their interpretations primacy in therapeutic encounters. To counter this risk, therapist "transparency" (Freeman & Lobovits, 1993) is advocated. As clients share their constructions, so do therapists, at least to the extent to which they appear relevant to matters at hand.

The solution-focused and reflexive conversation approaches are less concerned with the wider context of therapy. As indicated, the former favors a somewhat "minimalist" orientation (Chang & Philips, 1993; Friedman, 1993). Says de Shazer (1993), "when it comes to doing therapy, doing therapy is all there is and, therefore, there is nothing outside of the therapy session that can help us understand what is going on in the session" (p. 89).

The reflexive conversation approach echoes the narrative perspective in its belief that "social sciences are ideologies invented at a moment in time for practical reasons" (Anderson & Goolishian, 1988, p. 373). But participants in reflexive conversation focus less on ideologies than narrative therapists. Like solution focused practitioners, they construe therapy as a linguistic event. The therapy system is seen as "a language system in which the client and the therapist create meaning with each other" (Anderson & Goolishian, 1988, p. 324).

As for relationship, each of these postmodern orientations places a strong emphasis on collaboration with clients. In the narrative tradition, White and Epston (1992) describe themselves as "consulting" with their clients, or conducting "co-research" (Epston, 1994) with them. The underlying assumption is that individuals and families are the "authority on their own lives" (White & Epston, 1992, p.17).

The solution-focused approach similarly advocates an equitable relationship in which client-therapist "fit" is considered critical to therapeutic success (Chang & Philips, 1993). According to Lipchik (1994), "the art of brief, effective solution construction lies in the therapists' ability to construct an effective collaboration, to say precisely on track with the clients and work towards the clients' goals" (p. 38).

Reflexive conversationalists view therapy as a mutual exploration through dialogue, where the therapist is a participant-observer and participant-manager of the conversation (Anderson, & Goolishian, 1988). A tentative, questioning disposition is advocated; the relationship with clients is founded on the search for new meanings.

Use of Questions

As indicated, curiousity (Freedman and Combs, 1994, April) and "not knowing" (Anderson, 1993) are primary qualities of the collaborative therapist. When no truth is unassailable, wondering replaces certainty, and conversation unfolds in the subjunctive rather than the indicative mood. The therapist adopts an inquiring stance in an effort to get at families' unique constructions of reality. Questions are not posed to "gather information for the purpose of understanding causes" (Lipchik, 1994): causality is of greater concern in modernist approaches modelled more closely on the natural sciences. Instead, questions are used to generate alternatives and manifest multiple perspectives. As such, they become the primary vehicle of change.

While narrative and solution-focused approaches utilize question lines which are somewhat rhetorical (Nichols & Schwartz, 1991) in that they are focused upon certain areas of concern, none of these approaches favor directiveness. The Ericksonian notion of the client as a font of resources hovers in

the background, with the result that families and individuals are given room to generate their own solutions and new meanings.

Narrative practitioners (Epston, 1993; Epston & White, 1992; Freedman & Combs, 1993; White & Epston, 1990) have written extensively on the use of questions. In a manner consistent with all of the collaborative approaches, they are used as a way of generating experience rather than gathering information, and to invite clients into "a vivid, robust experience of alternative possibilities" (Freedman & Combs, 1993, p. 294). White (1992) and Epston (1993) have devised questions towards this end which invite clients to experience themselves as others experience them.

Following a narrative approach, questions are also used to separate problem and person, thereby objectifying the practices of power seen as giving rise to problems in the first place. Questions probe the problem's influence on the clients, and the clients' influence on the problem. "Landscape of action" questions uncover the histories of alternate and preferred ways of acting and being; "landscape of consciousness" questions focus on what these preferred stories suggest about persons' motives and commitments. White (1992) describes the role of these questions as *deconstructive* : they help to uncover the "archaeology", or historical origins, of both problem stories and alternative, preferred stories. At the same time, they open up space for the consideration of alternative narratives.

Solution-focused practice also adopts a rigorous approach to questions, using them to elicit, clarify, and enhance descriptions of change (Chang & Phillips, 1993). De Shazer (1988) has developed a systematic format which allows the therapist to determine the level of the clients' commitment to change, and then to identify exceptions to the problem which become the building blocks of solutions. Like White, de Shazer (1991) also describes a process of

"deconstructing" the problem through questions. However, rather than tracing its historo-cultural roots, de Shazer unpacks the complementary, oppositional meaning inherent in the problem: he shines a light on the *non* problem which is part of the problem's definition. As the questions are clustered around these exceptions, the problem recedes to the background and the solution emerges as the primary description.

Solution-focused practice in particular advocates the use of future-oriented questions to help clarify clients' goals and in some cases, to identify and name exceptions which have not actually manifested themselves. The so-called "miracle question" achieves this by drawing out the client's descriptions of what their lives would look like in the absence of the problem.

In reflexive conversation, questions are used to move the dialogue towards the not yet seen, the not yet heard, and the not yet thought of (Andersen, 1993). Tom Anderson speaks of questions which introduce a different perspective for clients--one which is neither too small (and thus goes unnoticed) nor too large (and thus provokes resistance). When working with a reflecting team (Andersen, 1987) of clinicians who observe the session and later engage in dialogue about it while the family watches, questions are permeated with tentativeness. Much is possible, nothing is certain; the family is free to extract those meanings which resonate and are useful for them.

What distinguishes this orientation from both narrative and solution-focused approaches is that questions do not emerge from a conceptual frame and are not targeted at uncovering anything in particular. This is pure exploration--a collaborative foray into unknown worlds which is seen as a developmental process for both clients *and* therapists (Anderson & Goolishian, 1990).

Change: Concept and Technique

While the perspectives outlined here share a wide range of conceptual premises, the three approaches are more easily distinguished along clinical lines. Because of space constraints, I will present a necessarily limited summary of their different concepts and techniques regarding change.

The narrative school characterizes change as a process of liberation from oppressive normative truths, knowledges, meanings or stories. This liberation is accomplished through questioning, as discussed, and through the therapist's persistent refusal to identify clients with their "problem-saturated stories" (White & Epston, 1990). This is accomplished through the process of "externalization" -- arguably the most innovative aspect of the narrative approach. By situating the problem outside of the family, space is freed for engaging in the re-authoring of their lives in defiance of an oppressive narrative.

Emphasizing history and context, narrative practitioners naturally focus on the full cultural and temporal dimensions of stories. Clients are seen as having been "recruited" (White, 1992) into living stories that do not serve them. The process of change is therefore construed as far more than the adoption of new behavioral patterns: in effect, it entails a re-evaluation of their personhood.

In order to truly take hold, alternative stories must be *performed* . Thus, while therapeutic conversation may be regarded as constitutive, it is in manifesting new meanings before witnesses that the changes become firmly established. This notion borrows from anthropologist Edward Bruner, who describes how this process unfolds at the wider cultural level: "it is in the performance of an expression that we re-experience, re-live, re-create, re-tell, re-construct, and re-fashion our culture" (1986, p.11). White and Epston (1990) exchange letters with clients to reinforce the emerging stories, and they encourage

clients to invite family members and friends to bear witness to the changes they are making. Recently, White and Epston(1994) only half-facetiously discussed what a variety of such ritualistic, performative practices might be worth in terms of numbers of sessions. They concluded that the session-value of a home-coming parade actually staged for a client by friends and acquaintances was virtually inestimable.

Although solution-focused practice bears many similarities to narrative family therapy (Chang & Phillips, 1993), there are some fundamental differences between them. Whereas narrative practice has been much informed by Foucault's social criticism and views the wider social context as inescapably relevant, solution-focused work owes more to Wittgenstein's (cf. 1963) analysis of language. Accordingly, de Shazer depicts clinical cases as logical, linguistic puzzles to be solved in and of themselves. In *Putting Difference to Work* (1991), he strikes a line through the word "problem" to emphasize that problems do not have the substance and inertia we typically attribute to them. They are one half of a pair which includes "nonproblem". Solution-focused work is about inverting the presumed hierarchy, "making what is seemingly secondary into what is primary" (de Shazer, 1991, p. 85). Narrative practitioners share the solution-focused enthusiasm for possibilities, and for the creation of new meaning which runs through social constructionist thought. But they construe clients' efforts in more sweeping terms, depicting an almost heroic struggle against the subjugating forces of society. While depicted in largely cultural terms, this drama also unfolds at the intrapsychic level because of the manner in which internalized stories form the fabric of our identities.

For de Shazer, therapy is a "language game" (1991). He does not situate the changes which clients seek in an historo-cultural context. Rather, "change is

change as long as it is satisfactory to clients, as long as the changes they depict are ones that indicate to them that a solution has developed" (p.102). Solutions are ways of thinking and acting which are not the problem. Their foundations are usually present in clients' stories. When they are not, future-oriented questions elicit concrete descriptions of them. These become the goals of therapy, which are "depictions of what will be *present* , what will be happening in the clients' lives when the complaint is absent" (p. 112).

The word "technique", though not favored by any of these approaches, is most foreign to reflexive conversation, which adopts a deliberately unsystematic orientation to therapy. Hoffman (Hoffman-Hennessy & Davis, 1993) describes therapy as the putting in and putting out of a canoe in a river: *exploration* is the object, with no particular destination in mind. Nevertheless, the family's own expressions of what they want, changeable as they may be, are taken as a guide for the trip at hand.

Language is the central focus of the reflexive conversation approach, which portrays itself as moving towards 'dissolving' the problem and cultivating a new sense of agency and freedom for the client" (Anderson, 1993, p 325). Since meaning is imbedded in language, conversation is regarded as the vehicle for generating new meanings, and "change, whether in the cognitive of behavioral domain, is a natural consequence of dialogue" (p 325).

Reflecting teams, though not necessary to this approach, add a richness by contributing multiple perspectives. Hoffman (1993) describes the reflecting team as "a Delphic commentary that is long on associations and stories and short on interpretations and problem solving" (p. 360). Andersen (1987) emphasizes that the team should continually reflect a both/and orientation and shun any debate about which interpretation is "right".

Conclusions

While the clinical and theoretical innovations accompanying these postmodern approaches have been in evidence for more than a decade, they have not yet been placed in a unifying framework in the way that the system metaphor contextualizes mainstream family therapy theory and practice. This paper attempts to further that goal by illustrating the epistemological and conceptual links behind these contemporary approaches to family therapy.

Despite their manifold differences, the collaborative approaches discussed here can be seen as representative of a distinct new generation of family therapy, and indeed of psychotherapy in general. Just as early systemic thinkers unleashed a dizzying array of innovations upon the field, the practitioners cited here are engaged in a similar creative outburst. By granting primacy to a social constructionist epistemology, they are shifting the locus of attention from systemic interplay to the constitutive power of interpretation and meaning-making. Persons are construed as the authors of their own lives, agents of their own change. As O'Hanlon (1993a) puts it, these are therapies of *possibility*.

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Footnotes

1. The term "narrative" is now utilized in a number of research and clinical domains within psychology which focus on the storied nature of experience. In this context, it applies to an approach to *family therapy* associated with White, Epston, and colleagues. Despite their insistence their contribution not be named a "school" per se, the title serves to point to a distinction which deserves emphasis.
2. In the past, Anderson and Goolishian (1988) have described their work as a "language systems" approach; but their writing (Anderson & Goolishian, 1990; Goolishian & Anderson, 1992, 1992b) increasingly de-emphasizes systems in favor of meaning and interpetation.
3. For a detailed description of the process whereby meanings are constructed and consolidated through time in a social milieu, see Berger and Luckmann's seminal work, *The Social Construction of Reality*. (1966).
4. The term "stucturalist" is here used in contrast to the post-structuralist thinking associated with the collaborative therapies. It is not to be confused with structural family therapy (cf. Minuchin, 1974).